



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

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HEADLINE	02/03 Job market: workers quit near record rate
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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/us-job-market-faces-reshuffling-workers-quit-near-record-rates-2022-02-03/
GIST	<p>Feb 3 (Reuters) - Gina Marino quit two jobs last year.</p> <p>In the summer, she left a position at a small social media marketing agency for a bigger firm offering more money and greater responsibility.</p> <p>Three months later, despite liking her colleagues and the company but realizing she lacked passion for the industry she was supporting, she quit again.</p> <p>Marino, 25, wasn't out of work for long. A more targeted job search brought fast responses from companies needing to fill spots immediately.</p> <p>"The help was really needed," said Marino, who lives in Stamford, Connecticut. Last fall, she landed another social media marketing role - this time for a hair care company, which is more in line with her interests.</p> <p>She's hardly alone. Nearly 4 million Americans on average quit their jobs each month last year, an unprecedented wave of workplace turnover as the economy emerged from a pandemic-induced recession that, while brief, appears to be leaving a lasting imprint on the U.S. job market.</p> <p>Job openings are near historically high levels as companies seek to rebuild staff or pivot in response to changes in consumer demand, and there aren't enough workers to fill all the positions. As of December, there were nearly two openings for every unemployed person, according to the Labor Department.</p> <p>That mismatch means that many workers are finding themselves with more options - and taking them. With hiring still outpacing the level of quits, some economists say the trend dubbed the "Great Resignation" is really more of a great reshuffling as people take advantage of the tight labor market to move into jobs with better pay, more flexibility or to try something new.</p> <p>"The job has become a commodity," said Nela Richardson, chief economist for the payroll processor ADP. "If you don't like this one, you can get another one."</p> <p>Companies with open positions need to cast a wider net to reach the right candidate and some are seeking more help.</p> <p>Business is booming for Goodwin Recruiting, which works regularly with hospitality customers. Allegra Highsmith, vice president of operations, said the firm is now recruiting for roughly 4,700 openings, up from about 1,500 at the start of March 2020, just before the pandemic shuttered the economy.</p> <p>The firm also doubled its network of independent contractors that help to recruit workers, to more than 200 from about 100 at the end of 2019.</p> <p>Recruiters are increasingly having frank conversations with employers about how they need to make their offers more appealing by raising pay, improving benefits or adding bonuses and other perks, said Highsmith.</p> <p>Gianfranco Sorrentino, the owner of three Italian restaurants in Manhattan, Il Gattopardo, Mozzarella & Vino, and The Leopard at des Artistes, is experiencing that firsthand. He bumped up the hourly pay for some kitchen roles, such as porters and dishwashers, to \$18 from \$15. He also increased the salaries for workers in management by between 15% and 20%.</p> <p>But Sorrentino, who also owns a catering business, said he is still having a hard time finding skilled managers, servers and bartenders. "We have to be competitive not only with the other restaurants, but with every other kind of industry that is offering the same things," he said.</p>
	HAVING TO STEP AWAY

Not all people who quit are moving to better jobs. Some people are struggling to work because of ongoing disruptions with childcare, and others have had to quit because they don't have paid sick time or are worried about facing increased health risks on the job, said Elise Gould, a senior economist for the Economic Policy Institute.

"It could be a short-term spell of having to step away," said Gould.

Nearly 9 million people said they did not work in the first few weeks of January because they were sick with coronavirus or caring for someone who was, according to a Census bureau survey. Economists are dimming their outlooks for job growth in January, with more forecasting that the U.S. economy lost jobs as the Omicron wave hampered demand and led to event cancellations.

How long will the labor shakeup last? It's possible the churn could slow this year as the reopening phase winds down and more employers either find the workers they're looking for or learn to manage without them, Richardson said.

Some companies are using technology and automation to get by with smaller staffs or to minimize the risk of disruptions and shutdowns when COVID-19 infections rise, which could lower the demand for workers.

Meanwhile, more people may re-enter the labor market if a subsiding pandemic eases the strains that are keeping them at home, and with more competition for jobs, fewer people might quit, Gould said.

In the meantime, some workers are rethinking what they do and how they spend their time.

Gabby Ianniello didn't have a job lined up when she quit her job in real estate development in February 2021 seeking a way to spend more time with family and avoid burnout.

She left her Upper West Side Manhattan apartment and moved back in with her parents in Long Island, where she was able to dedicate more time to a podcast and website called the Corporate Quitter, where she shares stories of people like herself who quit their jobs. She earns money from digital product offerings like courses and guides and through consulting, partnerships and affiliate marketing.

Now Ianniello, 28, no longer has to get up at 5 a.m. to squeeze in a run and a shower before getting to the office at 8 a.m. Instead of wearing pencil skirts and heels, she can work in her pajamas. "The great thing is I have autonomy on my schedule so I can kind of pick and choose what I want to do and set the parameters of when I take calls and when I don't," she said. "It's freedom."

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HEADLINE	02/02 Economic recovery going into reverse
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/03/economy/january-jobs-report-preview/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)The Omicron variant put a massive speed bump in the road to America's recovery this winter. The first signs of trouble could show up in the January jobs report Friday.</p> <p>The White House on Monday prepared Americans for disappointment about the jobs numbers: Jared Bernstein, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, told CNN the number of jobs added at the start of 2022 could be "unusually low" because of Omicron.</p> <p>The highly infectious variant led millions of workers to call in sick, or in some cases show up to work ill, in the past weeks.</p> <p>Economists polled by Refinitiv predict 150,000 jobs were added in January. That would make it the worst report since December 2020, when the economy shed jobs. Rising Covid infections were also an issue then.</p>

But a closer look at the forecast shows that plenty of analysts anticipate job losses: Goldman Sachs ([GS](#)) expects a drop of 250,000, while research consultancy Capital Economics and Jefferies ([JEF](#)) predict a loss of 200,000 positions.

On Wednesday, the ADP Employment Report, which tracks private payrolls, showed an [unexpected drop of 301,000 jobs](#) last month. Although the ADP and government reports aren't correlated, it is adding to the worry about what Friday's tally might look like.

Omicron's bad timing

The Omicron surge began in December. But the full fallout will probably become visible in the economic data for the start of 2022.

The [December jobs report](#) showed the US economy added 199,000 jobs, but that was based on surveys conducted before the Omicron wave gathered pace. That's why economists predict January will look worse.

"It turns out that the peak of Omicron cases coincided with when the [January] data for the payroll survey was being collected, and if you were not at work, if you were on unpaid leave, you're not counted as being on the payroll," Bernstein told CNN's Victor Blackwell in an interview Monday.

Those numbers include workers who got sick themselves, but also those who had to stay home to care for ill relatives or children home from school.

[Nearly 9 million American workers](#) said they were not working because of the virus -- either because they were sick themselves or because they cared for someone in their household -- according to the most recent US Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, conducted between December 29 and January 10.

The good news: Omicron rates are falling rapidly, and the economy should bounce back quickly. Last winter's brief drop and the Delta surge in the summer didn't prevent a year of [record-breaking jobs growth in 2021](#).

Even so, the impact from the variant will permeate economic reports throughout early 2022. Last week, Bank of America ([BAC](#)) warned of a significant [risk that America's GDP will shrink](#) in the first quarter because of Omicron.

Goldman Sachs echoed that sentiment this week, forecasting an abrupt slowing of growth and consumer spending.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Mystery coronavirus signal in NYC sewage
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/health/coronavirus-wastewater-new-york.html
GIST	<p>Last January, a team of researchers searching for the coronavirus in New York City's wastewater spotted something strange in their samples. The viral fragments they found had a unique constellation of mutations that had never been reported before in human patients — a potential sign of a new, previously undetected variant.</p> <p>For the past year, these oddball sequences, or what the scientists call “cryptic lineages,” have continued to pop up in the city’s wastewater.</p> <p>There is no evidence that the lineages, which have been circulating for at least a year without overtaking Delta or Omicron, pose an elevated health risk to humans. But the researchers, whose findings will be published in Nature Communications on Thursday, still have no idea where they came from.</p>

“At this point, what we can say is that we haven’t found the cryptic lineages in human databases, and we have looked all over,” said Monica Trujillo, a microbiologist at Queensborough Community College and an author of the new paper.

The researchers themselves are torn about the lineages’ origins. Some lean toward the explanation that the virus is coming from people whose infections aren’t being captured by sequencing. But others suspect that the lineages may be coming from virus-infected animals, possibly the city’s enormous population of rats. Even then, the favored theory can change from day-to-day or hour-to-hour.

Answers remain elusive.

“I think it’s really important that we find the source, and we have not been able to pin that down,” said John Dennehy, a virologist at Queens College and an author of the paper.

Strange sequences

The researchers — who also include Marc Johnson, a virologist at the University of Missouri, Davida Smyth, a microbiologist at Texas A&M University and others — have been sampling wastewater from 14 treatment plants in New York City since June 2020. In January of 2021, they began doing targeted sequencing of the samples, focusing on part of the gene for the virus’s all-important spike protein.

Although this approach provides a limited look at the viral genome, it allows researchers to extract a lot of data from wastewater, in which the virus is typically fragmented.

Viral fragments with novel patterns of mutations appeared repeatedly at a handful of treatment plants, the researchers found. (They could not disclose the specific plants or areas of the city, they said.)

“To date we have not seen these variants among clinical patients in N.Y.C.,” said Michael Lanza, a spokesman for New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley have found similar sequences in one California sewershed, said Rose Kantor, a microbiologist at the university.

The scientists’ continuing quest to figure out where the sequences are coming from highlights both the potential of wastewater surveillance, which can help scientists keep tabs on how the virus is evolving, and the challenge of making sense of any anomalies pulled out of the murk.

“We really struggled trying to understand what it was that we had,” Dr. Trujillo said.

The lineages could be coming from people whose infections have escaped detection or whose virus has not been sequenced.

But the fact that they kept turning up at the same few wastewater plants makes this theory less likely, the researchers said, given that New Yorkers, and any variants they may be carrying, tend to move throughout the city without restriction.

Still, Dr. Dennehy speculated that the sequences could be coming from people who are confined to long-term health care facilities in just a few areas of the city. But he has not been able to prove it.

“We were able to pin it down to a very small area of the sewershed,” Dr. Dennehy said. “And I emailed doctors and hospitals in those areas and never once got a response to my emails.”

Indeed, people who have compromised immune systems may have more difficulty fighting off the virus, giving it more opportunities to mutate. Many scientists theorize that Omicron emerged from an immunocompromised patient.

Intriguingly, some of the cryptic lineages have some of the same mutations as Omicron, or mutations in the same locations. Laboratory experiments suggest that these lineages may also be able to evade some antibodies.

The New York City lineages might be a result of the same kind of selective pressure to evade some of the body's immune defenses, the researchers theorize.

On the other hand, the lineages have been circulating for long enough now that they should have appeared in at least one sample sequenced from an infected person, some scientists said.

"To have something in a sewershed that you're detecting, you need a fair bit of it around," said Dr. Adam Lauring, a virologist at the University of Michigan, who was not involved in the research.

Dr. Johnson, the Missouri virologist, agrees. He favors the hypothesis that the sequences are coming from animals, perhaps a few specific populations with limited territories. In May and June of 2021, when the number of human Covid-19 cases in the city was low, the mysterious lineages made up a greater proportion of the viral RNA in wastewater, suggesting that they may have come from a nonhuman source.

The researchers initially considered a diverse array of potential hosts, from squirrels to skunks. "This is a very promiscuous virus," Dr. Johnson said. "It can infect all kinds of species."

To narrow down the possibilities, they went back to the wastewater, assuming that any animal that was shedding virus might be leaving its own genetic material behind, too.

Although a vast majority of the genetic material in the water came from humans, small amounts of RNA from dogs, cats and rats were also present, the scientists found.

Dr. Johnson has been considering rats, which roam the city by the millions. In his lab, he created pseudoviruses — harmless, nonreplicating viruses — with the same mutations present in the cryptic sequences. The pseudoviruses were able to infect both mouse and rat cells, he found. The original version of the virus does not appear able to infect rodents, although some other variants, like Beta, can.

"So in and of itself, that isn't huge data, but it is at least consistent with the idea that it's coming from rodents," Dr. Johnson said.

Since last summer, the scientists have been working with Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture to look for signs of the virus in blood and fecal samples from local rats. So far, they've come up empty.

"Maybe we're not hitting the right animals," Dr. Dennehy said.

Or maybe rats aren't the source of the mystery lineages. Scientists have repeatedly found that human can pass the virus to animals, especially pets, zoo animals, farmed mink and others with which they are in frequent contact. That has raised concerns that the virus might establish itself in an animal reservoir, where it might mutate and get passed back to humans.

But rats have not typically been high on the list of concern, and there has not been any evidence that the virus is circulating in wild rats. The pathway by which humans could have infected rats is also unknown. "Nothing makes perfect sense," Dr. Johnson said.

But some kind of animal origin remains a possibility, scientists said.

"It's just as plausible, if not more plausible, than a human origin," Dr. Lauring said.

	<p>So the search continues. Dr. Johnson has developed a new technique that can amplify only non-Omicron sequences, which should make it easier to detect the lineages. He has also begun searching for similar lineages in sewage samples from other states, which might help provide further clues to their origins.</p> <p>“We will know eventually,” Dr. Johnson said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Eastern WA cases to start drop in weeks
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/health/srhd-eastern-washington-covid-peak-this-month/293-9610b990-4d2f-4898-97c7-75e5d67dd2b3
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — According to the Washington Department of Health COVID-19 dashboard, the number of overall state COVID cases is beginning to fall.</p> <p>Spokane Regional Health District health officer Dr. Francisco Velázquez said western Washington counties are seeing a decrease in COVID case rates and eastern Washington counties should follow in the next few weeks.</p> <p>Currently, hospitals are seeing COVID patient numbers at an all-time high.</p> <p>Earlier this week, Providence Chief Executive Susan Stacey said Sacred Heart saw a record-breaking number of COVID patients, topping over one hundred.</p> <p>Dr. Velázquez said to help stop the spread, it will take all of the community doing their individual parts.</p> <p>"Every bit we as community members of the community can do to prevent one more case," Dr. Velázquez said. "One more case in schools, one more case in hospitals, one more case, in the long term care facility, one more case, wherever it may be, it is important for us to remain diligent."</p> <p>And in remaining diligent, Dr. Velázquez said people need to continue wearing their masks, getting vaccinations and boosters and paying attention to symptoms.</p> <p>He said this will help us reach the peak, but once eastern Washington begins to see COVID case numbers drop, it's important to note that COVID won't disappear overnight.</p> <p>"We still have a few weeks of high case rates," Dr. Velázquez said. "And even when we peak and start a downward trend, please remember that that's a downward trend from a very, very, very high number of cases. So it's going to take a while for us to come down, and we're not going to go down to zero, there's still going to be some cases in the community."</p> <p>Dr. Ali Mokdad, professor at the University of Washington, said COVID will become more manageable like all other endemics, like influenza or measles.</p> <p>Dr. Velázquez said the community should prepare to see a decrease in eastern Washington COVID cases early February.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Downtown Seattle turns to security firms
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/police-staffing-shortages-downtown-businesses-security-firm/281-1496cf07-5dc4-447c-8d02-745eb3b55844
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Frustrated shop owners in Seattle say the cost of doing business downtown keeps climbing, and they point to concerns about safety as a major reason why.</p> <p>The Downtown Seattle Association says \$564,000 was spent in the 2020/21 fiscal year, with most of that money from businesses going to private security firms.</p>

Downtown Seattle Association provided this statement to KING 5:

"We've been contracting with SPD to provide officers on overtime shifts for years, but decreased staffing levels meant SPD couldn't fill the number of shifts we had requested. And we know sections of downtown need more attention. We're contracting with a private security firm so we can supplement the shifts that SPD can still provide. The additional security provides support so our ambassador teams can work safely, and offers an extra set of eyes that can respond quickly and coordinate with SPD, if public safety needs arise."

On the corner of 3rd Avenue and Union in downtown Seattle, Maria Coassin owns Gelatiamo, a business she's operated in that location for 25 years. Coassin says the last couple of years have been the worst she has seen when it comes to crime and vandalism.

On Wednesday, she showed surveillance video of three incidents that she says have happened since mid-December. Two windows were shattered and a fire was set outside of the shop.

"Somebody came in and smashed the front door," she said.

On 3rd Avenue, there are boarded-up buildings on both sides of the street, and Coassin says there's also been criminal activity.

"Drug dealing, thefts, we had two shootings in two days, two weeks ago, right outside the store," she said.

A Seattle police spokesperson told KING 5 that they do provide extra patrols when possible, but the department is dealing with staffing shortages. Currently, SPD has 948 deployable officers departmentwide. At one point, the department was budgeted to have about 1,350 officers.

Downtown building managers and businesses are also hiring private security.

At the Melbourne Tower, located near 3rd Avenue and Pike, they have private security seven days a week, and it is costing just under \$1,000 a day, according to General Manager Lou Bond.

"It's crazy that we have to do that," said Bond. "What we're facing specifically here has been really challenging."

"To spend additional money just to be able to safely operate? You got to be kidding. It's just doesn't make sense," said Coassin.

The Mayor's office provided this statement to KING 5, saying Mayor Bruce Harrell is working on building up staffing at the Seattle Police Department:

"Mayor Harrell believes it is unacceptable that small and local businesses are feeling the burden of providing core public safety responsibilities. He also believes it is unacceptable that the police force has reached this severely reduced level of staffing. He is committed to restoring staffing to national best practice levels and is working with the Seattle Police Department on strategies to address the impacts of and make progress on this staffing shortage -- now and in the long term."

"Additionally, Mayor Harrell knows the challenges facing downtown are real and significant -- for neighborhood residents and local businesses. He is regularly meeting with neighbors, businesses, stakeholders, and public safety advocates to advance change, reset norms, and make measurable progress toward a thriving downtown. With regard to immediate crime and safety issues, he is also meeting with the Chief of Police and Police Department on a plan for action within the first quarter of the year."

"Behind every small business there is a heart and there is a story, and sometimes we just don't look at that. We just look at oh, its another business down," said Coassin.

	Coassin's family has been in the bakery business for 200 years, and she says she is determined to keep her small downtown shop going.
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HEADLINE	02/02 Seattle sidewalks overrun by homeless
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/project-seattle/one-month-in-still-no-clear-plan-from-mayor-harrell-on-homeless-crisis
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — More tents are being pitched in downtown Seattle and other neighborhoods of the city, raising safety concerns from some pedestrians forced to walk in the street in order to navigate around the obstructions.</p> <p>The return of the tents has occurred one month into the term of new Mayor Bruce Harrell who is now facing complaints from some business owners and concerned residents who are accusing him of not following through on his promise to confront the issue.</p> <p>A spokesperson for the mayor said he plans to share more details about Harrell’s homeless response plan at the State of the City address scheduled for Feb. 15.</p> <p>On one recent day, Eric Baker struggled to maneuver his wheelchair around a tent that occupies most of the sidewalk near the King Street bus station.</p> <p>“Now it’s getting worse again,” he said, adding that new tents have appeared on sidewalks across the across the city which translates into more obstacles for him.</p> <p>Scott Bader said a massive tent, measuring more than 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide, was erected a few days ago.</p> <p>“You walk around and you shake your head,” he said. “It’s just an unfortunate situation the city needs to get on.”</p> <p>Streets that lead to some of the city's busiest tourist hot spots, like the gateway to the Washington State Convention Center and Pike Place Market, have been overrun by new tents and homeless encampments in recent days.</p> <p>The tents have not just showed up in Downtown Seattle's core, similar situations are playing out across parts of Capitol Hill, Ballard and the International District, right in front of mom- and-pop shops.</p> <p>There is also a cluster of tents across the street from Seattle City Hall, right under Mayor Harrell’s office.</p> <p>Mariana Huben said she feels helpless watching the crisis unfold, saying even though Harrell has been in office for just over a month, he should be doing more.</p> <p>“I mean he ran on the fact he had a plan for issues like this,” she said. “So, it is disheartening to see that it isn’t being implemented. I believe decisive was the word of this campaign.”</p> <p>Harrell has refused to answer questions from KOMO News on camera about the homeless situation since he was sworn into office.</p> <p>When asked Wednesday if a clear a strategy is in place to deal with the situation, a spokesperson said in a written statement that read in part: “The challenge cannot be solved overnight, but the mayor also strongly believes there must be visible progress. He is committed to creating a public facing dashboard with detailed information and statistics around the city's response to homelessness, which would include a map feature. at the same time, he's working closely with the regional homelessness authority and other local stakeholders.”</p>

	<p>City Councilman Andrew Lewis represents downtown and said he is optimistic the problem will be addressed since Harrell is already collaborating with the council on this issue, and the homeless plan will likely involve on going outreach efforts and more housing options.</p> <p>“Unlike in the previous administration, there was actually a fairly swift response from the Harrell Administration regarding the tents that re-emerged on 3rd Avenue,” Lewis said. “They’re no longer there and the folks got put into shelter.”</p> <p>As for immediate solutions, the Seattle Department of Transportation said its crews and other city agencies are consistently going out to clear tents blocking the sidewalks. KOMO News saw that activity Wednesday while it occurred.</p> <p>“We all want to see progress,” said James Sido, with the Downtown Seattle Association, who is nonetheless asking his business members to remain patient while reminding them the mayor made a promise.</p> <p>“They all campaigned on it,” Sido said. “And it is on top of their priority list.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Rank: 3 counties among worst Covid rates
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/3-washington-counties-rank-among-worst-covid-19-infection-rates-in-u-s-data-shows
GIST	<p>FRANKLIN COUNTY, Wash. - Franklin, Benton and Whitman counties have among the worst COVID-19 infection rates in the U.S., according to national data compiled by the New York Times.</p> <p>All three counties have a vaccination rate of 55% or lower.</p> <p>Tri-City Herald reported Franklin County has the second-highest COVID rate in the country, averaging 515 cases per day, with a rate of 541 cases per 100,000 population. Given the county’s roughly 95,222 residents, these are comparatively large numbers.</p> <p>Franklin County is only beaten out by Alaska’s Nome Census Area, a remote region just across the Bering Strait from Russia. This area, comparatively, has a case rate of 831 per 100,000 population—far and away the highest in the nation.</p> <p>But, Washington’s representation in the top 10 does not end there; nationally, Whitman County, home of Pullman and Washington State University, is ranked fifth. Benton County, the other half of Tri-Cities, is ranked 10th.</p> <p>Whitman has a case rate of 457 per 100,000 population, a sharp climb of 289% in the last two weeks. Benton County has a rate of 407 per 100,000 population.</p> <p>For context, the Washington Department of Health considers a ‘relatively safe’ case rate between 0–10, and a mild case rate of 10–50. All Washington counties are currently above a case rate of 100 per 100,000 population, which denotes an extreme risk of transmission.</p> <p>This data is compiled by the New York Times, but other counts, like the Brown University School of Public Health, peg Franklin County as having an even higher rate of COVID infections.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Homeless camps along state highways
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/gov-proposes-task-force-of-intergovernmental-coordination-in-handling-homelessness

OLYMPIA, Wash. - The Washington State Senate, as requested by Gov. Jay Inslee, [proposed a bill](#) on Feb. 2 that would create a subdivision of the Department of Social and Health Services that would focus on 'intergovernmental coordination to address the [cleaning of homeless encampments](#).

The goal of the "Office of Intergovernmental Coordination on Public Right of Way Homeless Encampments" is to [reduce the number of people living along the highway](#) and eventually, get them into permanent housing.

Another goal of the division is to provide grants to local governments or nonprofit organizations, but there is no direct money to fund the new agency or pay for camp removals and temporary housing for its campers.

"The problem that I've seen with this is we lack a coordinated response for some of our most vulnerable Washingtonians," said Senator Patty Kuderer, a Democrat representing Bellevue who is sponsoring the bill for Inslee.

Inslee's office estimates that there are about 1,700 unsanctioned encampments along state-owned highways. These include tents hidden in the brush on the embankments, visible tent cities along on and off-ramps to interstates, and under overpasses.

It's been the responsibility of cities and counties to police and manage these camps, despite the camps being on state-owned property.

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has repeatedly said that the agency is not equipped to handle homeless campers and the outreach needed to get them off state property and into temporary housing.

Cities like Seattle, Tacoma, Fife and Olympia have been using city taxpayer funds to do outreach, camp removals and arrest people if they commit a crime in the camps, even though the camps are the responsibility of the state because they are on state property.

Legislation for removing homeless encampments across King County was shot down by the county's Local Services Committee.

"The city of Olympia traditionally has had a difficult time coordinating with the state when it comes to homelessness response," said Olympia Councilmember Dontae Payne.

Payne said the state has helped with some camps, but that is a new development.

In Fife, where I-5 and the new interchange with Highway 167 make up about 20% of the city's landmass, the city has had to deal with approximately 300 campers along the highways.

"The challenge is overwhelming for just one city" said lobbyist Doug Levy, who spoke on behalf of a Fife City Councilmember at a State Senate hearing.

WSDOT is frustrated as well. In a report released in November 2021 by the department, it said, "During the pandemic, resources and crews have been stretched more thin and in some cases, health officials recommended against removing encampments that don't pose immediate safety concerns."

Homeless advocates testified they don't want the new agency to be focused on camp sweeps.

"We want to ensure that this will not lead to people being moved unnecessarily when there's no imminent risk of harm," said Sara Robbins, the policy director for the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness.

	SB 5662 received a ‘do pass’ recommendation from the Senate Housing & Local Government Committee on Wednesday by a 7-3 vote with both Republicans and Democrats voting in favor of the bill.
	It now moves onto the Senate rules committee.
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HEADLINE	02/03 Olympic spotlight on Covid-tinged Games
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-russia-ukraine-coronavirus-pandemic-sports-health-f2335793918e4580952e172b2316d6b0
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — Long before the global pandemic upended sports and the world in general, the 2022 Winter Olympics faced unsettling problems.</p> <p>It started with the fact that hardly anybody wanted to host them.</p> <p>Beijing ended up solving that problem, but only after four European cities thought about it and dropped out, mostly because of expense and lack of public support. In the end, it was a race between two authoritarian countries. The IOC narrowly chose China’s capital and its mostly bone-dry surrounding mountains over a bid from Kazakhstan. “It really is a safe choice,” IOC President Thomas Bach said after the balloting.</p> <p>Some seven years after that fateful vote, the world will find out if Bach was right. Starting with Friday’s opening ceremony at the lattice-ribbed Bird’s Nest Stadium, the spotlight will be trained on China, a country with human-rights record that troubles many, an authoritarian government and a “zero-tolerance” policy when it comes to COVID. It will be trained on what figures to be the most closed-off, tightly controlled, hard-to-navigate Olympics in history.</p> <p>The build-up has turned the idea of “making it to the Games” into as much of a logistical and sometimes moral conundrum as a competitive one.</p> <p>“This is one where you can do your absolute best but you kind of have to juggle your sanity and being able to perform at the Olympics, and not lose your mind beforehand,” U.S. moguls skier Hannah Soar said.</p> <p>To be sure, if the 2 1/2 weeks of skiing, skating and sliding turn out to be like most Olympics before it, then it will be the athletes such as Hannah Soar — and snowboarder Chloe Kim, skier Mikaela Shiffrin and Norway’s cross country champion Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo, to name a few — that we’ll remember most.</p> <p>But there has been so much to process in the lead-up. And there’s no pretending that the International Olympic Committee’s decision to bring its biggest show to a country that is facing ever-increasing scorn from democracies in the West — a country that has been on a virtual lockdown since shortly after it sprouted the world’s first cases of COVID-19 more than two years ago — does not bring with it some stark considerations:</p> <p>— Human Rights. Led by the United States, a number of Western democratic countries are staging a diplomatic boycott of the Games to protest what the U.S. and human-rights groups have called the genocide of some 1 million Uyghurs in China’s far western Xinjiang province.</p> <p>— Dignitaries won’t attend, but athletes still will. German slider Natalie Geisenberger was among those who considered not coming, but then decided to make the journey, along with some 2,900 athletes from around 90 countries. Her conclusion: “We athletes have absolutely nothing to do with the decision to award the Olympic Games to Beijing — the (IOC) decides and we athletes are presented with a fait accompli.”</p>

— Health and safety. To try to prevent the spread of COVID, China will run these Olympics in a [“closed-loop” system](#). All participants will be tested daily. None will be allowed out of the hotels and venues that are cordoned off from the city and mountains where the Games will take place.

Participants will be placed in isolation if they test positive, and the stakes of a system that has not been clearly spelled out to everyone were on display when Belgian skeleton racer Kim Meylemans turned to social media Thursday and [gave a tearful explanation of her situation](#).

— Tennis player Peng Shuai. Her plight touches on almost all the sore points involved in bringing these games to this country: The Chinese champion’s safety has been in question since she accused a former high-ranking government official of sexually assaulting her. Some of the few signs that she might be OK have come courtesy of the IOC, which has shown pictures of Bach in video meetings with Peng. The IOC has indicated it will meet with Peng during the Olympics, [but its previous meetings have brought forth as many questions as answers](#).

— Cybersecurity. Many countries are advising their athletes to leave their cell phones and laptops home lest they be compromised by the Chinese government. Earlier this week, the head of the FBI in the U.S. said the Chinese government’s [hacking operations are “more brazen” than ever before](#).

— Russia. President Vladimir Putin is expected to attend the opening ceremony in what some will view as an audacious bit of politicking on two fronts. With [tensions escalating](#) on the Ukraine border, this conjures memories of the 2014 Olympics in Putin’s home country, during which Russia invaded and took over the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. It is also viewed by many as a slap in the face to anti-doping regulators who tried, without great success, [to sanction the country](#) for scandals of the past decade.

— The environment. The mountains hosting action sports and cross country skiing are about 150 miles from the Gobi Desert; they average less than a foot of snow a year. Though snowmaking is nothing new at Olympic venues, this is touted as the first Games to rely completely on artificial snow. To do it, the country had to build massive irrigations systems and will use up to 800 Olympic-sized swimming pools’ worth of water. It [brings into question](#) Beijing’s claims that these Games will be carbon neutral.

Oh, and about the sports — Norway is a decent bet to win the most medals, in part on the strength of a [deep roster of biathletes and cross country skiers](#). Russia, officially called “Russian Olympic Committee” because of doping sanctions, could challenge. Its men’s hockey team is favored after the NHL, with the omicron variant raging in North America, [decided not to shut down its season](#) to send players to the Olympics.

All in all, this is quite a different look for China from the last time the Olympics descended. That was in 2008, and the Summer Olympics were viewed as the [world’s chance to finally get to know a global behemoth](#).

More than attempting to put on a good face this time, [China is doing things by its own rules](#). COVID restrictions offer a convenient justification for not letting journalists wander the country to report on what’s really going on in this land of 1.4 billion.

“There are two audiences for this,” said David Bachman, an expert on China who teaches at University of Washington. “There’s the international audience. And it’s also going to be important to impress their own people with how efficiently the Games are run.”

Where [Russia spent a record \\$51 billion](#) on the 2014 Sochi Winter Games, and South Korea looked comparatively frugal by only spending \$13 billion, part of China’s pitch was that it wouldn’t drop nearly that much on what will be the third straight Olympics held in Asia.

It is repurposing the [opulent Bird’s Nest](#), built for the 2008 Games, as the stage for its opening ceremony. It [reclaimed an old steel mill](#) to build a big air jumping stadium for skiers and snowboarders.

	<p>Improvements in the mountains came thanks to the Olympics, and China is banking on a burst of new skiers and snowboarders to follow.</p> <p>Beijing organizers have put out a budget of around \$3.9 billion, but with no watchdogs tracking the money, the real cost is anyone's guess. One estimate said the true cost could be as much as 10 times that original budget.</p> <p>The money goes for what the IOC touts as a much-needed 17-day break from strife and politics — a break that allows a worldwide audience to revel in the glow of athletic accomplishment. NBC, for one, pays billions to pipe the action to the United States. But this year, its big-name commentators will be back home, calling the action remotely.</p> <p>It's one of hundreds of concessions made to the virus that first cropped up in China some 26 months ago, and has slapped an indelible imprint on the way the country must run these Games.</p> <p>Time will tell if all the trouble was worth it. The main reason American snowboarder Jamie Anderson decided to come: "At least for this one time in life," she said, "the world comes together over sports."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 US: Iran nuclear program too advanced
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sees-irans-nuclear-program-as-too-advanced-to-restore-key-goal-of-2015-pact-11643882545?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>The Biden administration expects a restored nuclear deal would leave Iran capable of amassing enough nuclear fuel for a bomb in significantly less than a year, a shorter time frame than the one that underpinned the 2015 agreement, U.S. officials familiar with the matter said.</p> <p>Administration officials concluded late last year that Iran's nuclear program had advanced too far to re-create the roughly 12-month so-called breakout period of the 2015 pact, the U.S. officials said.</p> <p>Despite the change, the U.S. is pushing ahead with talks. A revised deal needs to be reached soon, the officials said, to leave the U.S. and its allies with enough time to respond to an Iranian nuclear buildup.</p> <p>How limited that breakout period will be depends on the precise steps Iran agrees to take to dismantle, ship abroad, destroy or place under seal its stockpile of enriched uranium, machines for producing nuclear fuel and centrifuge manufacturing capacity.</p> <p>Reducing the breakout time in any revised pact raises fresh doubts about the Biden administration's ability to negotiate what U.S. officials have called a longer, stronger deal that would further restrain Iran's pathway to nuclear weapons and gain political support in Washington and among European allies.</p> <p>U.S. officials have said Washington would lift the bulk of the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration if Iran rejoins the deal. There are ongoing negotiations in Vienna about what assurances Washington will provide to help Iran enjoy the economic benefits of a restored deal.</p> <p>A State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the details of U.S. breakout assessments and said the administration is confident a deal "would address our urgent nonproliferation concerns."</p> <p>"As we have said, we have only a few weeks to conclude an understanding, after which the pace of Iran's nuclear advances will make return to the JCPOA impossible," the spokesperson said, referring to the formal name of the deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.</p> <p>The 12-month breakout time was a central tenet of the 2015 deal Iran reached with the U.S. and other powers, although it isn't mentioned explicitly in the accord. The period was based on analyses that if Iran abrogated the restraints imposed by the pact, Tehran would still need a year to develop enough fuel for one bomb, giving the U.S. and its allies time to respond.</p>

The Trump administration withdrew from the deal in 2018 and reimposed sweeping sanctions on Tehran, saying the agreement was insufficiently stringent. Since then, Iran has accelerated its nuclear program, reducing its breakout time to a few weeks, according to U.S. officials.

Some former U.S. officials warn that a deal with a breakout period of anything less than six months could weaken Washington's ability to respond to a sudden ramp-up of Iran's nuclear program.

Administration officials held internal deliberations last fall looking at breakout-time estimates under different scenarios, the officials familiar with the matter said. Those discussions made clear that the breakout time under any realistic deal would be significantly lower than 12 months, the officials said.

The breakout time is different from how long it would take Iran to attain a nuclear weapon because, according to Western officials, Iran is believed not to have mastered all the skills to build the core of a bomb and attach a warhead to a missile.

How much time Iran would need to amass enough nuclear fuel for a bomb is an estimate that depends on assumptions about its ability to operate different types of centrifuges, the speed of those machines and its skill in enriching uranium to weapons-grade levels.

Iran, which says its nuclear program is for purely peaceful purposes, has gradually expanded its nuclear work since mid-2019 and accelerated that work over the past year. It started producing 60% enriched uranium, near weapons grade, for the first time and worked on how to convert low-enriched uranium speedily into highly enriched material.

Critically, Tehran has also worked to improve its mastery of building, installing and running advanced centrifuges, which can produce enriched uranium far faster than the first generation of machines allowed under the 2015 deal. It has installed hundreds of these newer machines at its nuclear facilities.

"There's nothing that a restored JCPOA will do to compensate for that increased knowledge and experience" Iran has gained, said Robert Einhorn, a former senior State Department arms-control official.

Under a restored deal, Iran would have to ship abroad or scrap the vast bulk of its 2½ metric tons of enriched uranium, uninstall almost all advanced centrifuges and limit the stockpile of enriched uranium and the purity of its enrichment to 3.67% until 2031.

The constraints on Iran's nuclear research and development would gradually relax from 2024. Iran's new breakout time could then fall rapidly after 2026 when the deal allows Tehran to deploy some advanced centrifuges.

Western officials have been pushing for months, with mixed success, for Iran to accept measures that could lengthen how long it would take it to amass nuclear fuel. Iran has said that it won't allow its advanced centrifuges to be destroyed, although they would likely be taken out and placed under United Nations atomic agency seal under a restored deal, as they were in 2016.

Mr. Einhorn said a six-month breakout period would be enough time to respond—militarily if necessary—to an overt Iranian nuclear breakout. The sweeping monitoring and inspection powers included in the 2015 deal, which in some cases extend for another two decades, will also help restrain Iran's ability to make a covert dash for a nuclear weapon, long considered by U.S. officials to be a more likely scenario.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Strained hospitals seek foreign nurses
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/strained-us-hospitals-seek-foreign-nurses-amid-visa-82641001
GIST	With American hospitals facing a dire shortage of nurses amid a slogging pandemic, many are looking abroad for health care workers.

And it could be just in time.

There's an unusually high number of green cards available this year for foreign professionals, including nurses, who want to move to the United States — twice as many as just a few years ago. That's because U.S. consulates shut down during the coronavirus pandemic weren't issuing visas to relatives of American citizens, and, by law, these unused slots now get transferred to eligible workers.

Amy L. Erlbacher-Anderson, an immigration attorney in Omaha, Nebraska, said she has seen more demand for foreign nurses in two years than the rest of her 18-year career. And this year, she said, it's more likely they'll get approved to come, so long as U.S. consular offices can process all the applications.

"We have double the number of visas we've had available for decades," she said. "That is kind of temporarily creating a very open situation."

U.S. hospitals are struggling with a shortage of nurses that worsened as pandemic burnout led many to retire or leave their jobs. Meanwhile, coronavirus cases continue to rise and fall, placing tremendous pressure on the health care system. In California alone, there's an estimated gap of 40,000 nurses, or 14% of the workforce, according to a recent report by the University of California, San Francisco.

Hospitals are filling the gap by hiring traveling nurses, but that can be expensive. And hospital administrators say not enough nurses are graduating from U.S. schools each year to meet the demand.

Some hospitals have long brought nurses from the Philippines, Jamaica and other English-speaking countries, and more are now following suit. And both longtime recruiters and newcomers are trying to take advantage of the green card windfall before the fiscal year ends in September.

The U.S. typically offers at least 140,000 green cards each year to people moving to the country permanently for certain professional jobs, including nursing. Most are issued to people who are already living in the United States on temporary visas, though some go to workers overseas. This year, 280,000 of these green cards are available, and recruiters hope some of the extras can be snapped up by nurses seeking to work in pandemic-weary hospitals in the United States.

The Biden administration, which has made moves to reverse Trump-era policies restricting legal immigration, has taken some steps to try to help foreign health care workers so they can assist with the pandemic. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said it would speed the renewal of work permits for health care workers, which could help keep some foreign citizens already in the United States on the job. The State Department told consulates last year to prioritize applications for workers at facilities that are responding to the pandemic, an agency official said.

Faith Akinmade, a 22-year-old nurse from Nigeria, is among those hoping for a quick solution. After completing college in the U.S., Akinmade has been working as an ICU nurse for University of Louisville Hospital in Kentucky. But her work permit is set to expire in March. She said she needs it renewed, or her green card approved, to stay on the job.

"At this point and time, I just feel like I have faith that at the end of March something is going to show up to continue to work," Akinmade said. She said the issue affects many of her international colleagues as well as domestic ones, who may be pressed to take on shifts for colleagues if their immigration paperwork doesn't come through.

Dr. Roxie Wells, president of Cape Fear Valley Hoke Hospital in Raeford, North Carolina, said she started trying to bring over foreign nurses before the pandemic, but it wasn't until last year that these recruits started getting consular interviews in larger numbers. So far, about 150 were approved to come work, but Wells said they're still waiting on another 75.

“Obviously it has become more necessary during the pandemic,” she said. “The 150, if we didn’t have them, we would be in a precarious situation.”

The surge in the omicron variant in the United States has made the strained staffing situation even more apparent in hospitals as health care workers, like so many others, have been sickened by the highly contagious virus and sidelined from work at a time when more patients are coming in.

Sinead Carbery, president of Nurse Staffing Solutions for AMN Healthcare, said the demand for international nurses has risen between 300% and 400% since the pandemic began. The number of nurses that can be brought into the United States even with the additional green cards won't be enough to meet demand, and many more recruiters are now seeking to hire nurses overseas because there are immigrant visas available, she said.

“This is a window of opportunity,” she said. “Because everything is flowing so well, there's a lot of competition for that talent.”

National Nurses United, a union representing 175,000 registered nurses, said more scrutiny should be given to international recruitment to ensure foreign nurses aren't brought in and subjected to unsafe working conditions. The union contends hospitals drove away U.S. nurses by keeping staffing levels so low — and this was well before concerns arose about worker safety and protections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Michelle Mahon, the union's assistant director of nursing practice, said many foreign nurses sign yearslong contracts with employers, which can make it hard for them to speak up about labor or patient safety concerns. She said hospitals that saw nurses quit during the pandemic are turning to an overseas workforce to replace them.

“This kind of dynamic is particularly attractive right now to employers who have not made any of the changes necessary to ensure patient and nursing safety during this COVID-19 pandemic,” Mahon said. “Instead of them addressing the actual problem, they want to go and pivot to this other really fake solution.”

Hospital administrators, however, contend there simply aren’t enough U.S.-trained nurses to go around. Patty Jeffrey, president of the American Association of International Healthcare Recruitment, said the United States should expand nursing education programs to train more nurses domestically, as well as let more nurses come in from overseas. But she acknowledged bringing in a much larger number of nurses would require legislation.

“The calls are every day ringing off the hook: We need 100, we need 200, we need all these nurses,” Jeffrey said.

Jorge Almeida Neri, a 26-year-old nurse from Portugal, arrived in the United States in December, though he began the process before the pandemic. He said a required international nursing exam was delayed due to the virus and it took four months to get a consular interview, though other international nurses he's met waited much longer. He interviewed for his current job at a Virginia hospital, which he got through a staffing agency, about a year ago.

“After getting everything certified, the immigration process started, and I was like, ‘Oh, this is going to be quick.’ I was wrong,” he said.

Almeida Neri said many Portuguese nurses seek work overseas since wages are low, though many go elsewhere in Europe, which doesn't take as long as the United States.

Despite the demand, there's no guarantee hospitals will in fact snap up more visas. Greg Siskind, an immigration attorney, said U.S. consular offices aren't required to issue visas solely because they're available, and are hampered by limits on remote work and video interviews. He said most employment-

	<p>based green cards tend to go to professionals already in the United States, not overseas, though more could be done to speed these up, too.</p> <p>“Under their current policies, if they don't make any changes, it is going to be hard," he said of the likelihood the U.S. government will issue all the available visas, "but there's a lot of things they could do.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 January negative employment growth
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/02/adp-job-cuts-january-omicron/
GIST	<p>Private payrolls tumbled by 301,000 in January, posting their biggest drop-off since the onset of the pandemic, as the omicron variant set off a spike in coronavirus cases, according to data released Wednesday.</p> <p>The unexpected findings by ADP — which had forecast a gain of 200,000 jobs for the month — represent the first time the payrolls processing firm has reported negative employment growth since December 2020 and the biggest decline in employment since spring 2020. They also cut against federal data showing more moderate losses. The wide variance suggests the labor market was more chaotic last month than previously thought.</p> <p>The federal government will offer its own snapshot of the labor market on Friday, when it releases January jobs data. Though ADP’s estimates often differ, the shift it documented Wednesday — from a gain of 807,000 jobs one month, to a loss of 301,000 the next — could reset expectations for the Labor Department’s report.</p> <p>“The surge in Omicron is clearly slowing the job market,” tweeted Glassdoor senior economist Daniel Zhao, who called the ADP report a “negative indicator” for Friday’s jobs report.</p> <p>Kathy Jones, the chief fixed income strategist for Charles Schwab, said the ADP data may be a precursor to a weak jobs report on Friday.</p> <p>“The one thing to note is that all sectors are negative and the last time that happened was in April 2020,” Jones tweeted.</p> <p>There’s already ample signs that hiring slowed leading into the new year.</p> <p>More than 4 million people quit jobs in December, according to federal data released Tuesday, and more than 8 million missed work because they were sick or caring for someone who was sick from late December through early January. Roughly 247,000 Americans applied for unemployment insurance each week, according to the Labor Department, a significant uptick from November when the number of weekly claims dropped below 200,000.</p> <p>One major reason for this is the omicron variant, which picked up enormous velocity in December, shuttering many businesses, schools and day-care centers and disrupting life for many Americans. Though its spread appears to have peaked, it still is causing more than 2,000 deaths per day.</p> <p>The viral surge caused an estimated 8.8 million people to skip work because they were sick or caring for someone who was, according to the Census Bureau. Those numbers were the highest since the agency started collecting that data in April 2020.</p> <p>The manufacturing sector lost an estimated 21,000 positions, according to ADP, with executives complaining that covid-induced absenteeism is gumming up supply chains and, in some cases, contributing to inflation.</p>

Executives from Kimberly-Clark, maker of Cottonelle toilet paper, Huggies diapers and other household staples, said a shortage of labor up and down the supply chain has hindered its ability to meet consumer demand.

“The supply environment is probably more volatile now than we’ve seen throughout the whole covid period, right, because it’s affecting absenteeism, whether it’s in the distribution centers or the plants or our suppliers and missed deployments on pickup,” the company’s chairman and chief executive, Michael Hsu, said last week.

For Emerson Electric Co., a St. Louis-based manufacturer with a global workforce of 86,700 as of September, absenteeism rates ran as high as 20 percent in November and December at some factories in the Midwest, Chief Operating Officer Ram Krishnan said Tuesday in a call with investors. An executive from Massachusetts-based Boston Scientific said coronavirus-related absenteeism weighed on the business in December and worsened in January.

The bulk of the job losses, however, came in the service sector, which shed 274,000 positions. Of that number, 62,000 were lost at companies related to trade, transportation and utilities, while leisure and hospitality payrolls declined by 154,000. Small businesses were hit harder than medium- and large-size employers, accounting for nearly half of the total losses.

Still, analysts advised caution in terms of interpreting a single economic report. Mike Loewengart, managing director for investment strategy at Morgan Stanley’s E*Trade, said he thought the negative trajectory would be temporary, as it was driven so heavily by the service sector. Major retailers, for example, tend to shed jobs after the holidays.

“Amid a slew of strong earnings coming in, I wouldn’t be surprised if this was shrugged off,” Loewengart said in an email.

The labor market has been under significant pressure, especially during the past year. After more than 20 million people lost their jobs in March and April of 2020, companies have struggled to fill openings. This gave workers more leverage to demand better pay and benefits, which has led many to quit and seek different opportunities.

Some 4.3 million people quit or changed jobs in December, down from November’s all-time high but still close to record levels, the Labor Department reported. Employers had 10.9 million job openings in December.

While labor shortages vexed businesses throughout 2021, the omicron variant worsened matters in some industries. In early January, United Airlines was forced to cut flights as about 3,000 workers called in sick from covid. Walmart closed some stores in January so it could sanitize them, while Macy’s trimmed store hours.

As covid-19 cases surged, employers struggled to deal with outbreaks at work, and they had few of the safety net protections that cushioned the blow of previous waves. The subsidized Paycheck Protection Program loans that bolstered small business employment throughout 2020 are no longer available, with other industry-specific bailout programs drawing to a close.

Axalta Coating Systems, a leading producer of the specialized paint that goes on cars, reported December absenteeism rates as high as 15 percent, with a shortage of skilled technicians taking a sharp toll on the company’s customers. The average number of rental car days for a person getting their car fixed went up by four days in December, chief executive Robert Bryant said in a call with investors.

“It’s taking longer for people to get their cars fixed, and that has a lot to do with labor shortages,” Bryant said.

HEADLINE	02/02 NOAA satellites helped save 330 lives
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/emergency-preparedness/noaa-satellites-helped-save-330-lives-in-2021/
GIST	<p>NOAA's fleet of advanced satellites are essential for predicting weather and climate, and last year they also helped rescue 330 people from potentially life-threatening situations throughout the United States and its surrounding waters.</p> <p>Of the 330 U.S. rescues, 195 were water rescues, 29 were from aviation incidents and 106 were from events on land. Alaska had the most SARSAT rescues with 55, followed by Florida with 52 and California with 37.</p> <p>NOAA's polar-orbiting and geostationary satellites are part of the global Search and Rescue Satellite Aided Tracking system, or COSPAS-SARSAT, which uses a network of U.S. and international spacecraft to detect and locate distress signals sent from emergency beacons from aircraft, boats and handheld Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs) anywhere in the world. Since its start in 1982, COSPAS-SARSAT has been credited with supporting more than 48,000 rescues worldwide, including more than 9,700 in the United States and its surrounding waters.</p> <p>When a NOAA satellite pinpoints the location of a distress signal in the U.S., the information is relayed to the SARSAT Mission Control Center at NOAA's Satellite Operations Facility in Suitland, Maryland. From there, the information is sent quickly to Rescue Coordination Centers, operated either by the U.S. Air Force for land rescues, or the U.S. Coast Guard for water rescues. NOAA also supports rescues globally by relaying distress signal information to international SARSAT partners.</p> <p>Among the success stories last year, a miner was rescued from a 20-foot shaft about 30 miles northwest of Phoenix, Arizona, in the Bradshaw Mountains. The Air Force Rescue Coordination Center received the alert from the PLB and contacted the owner, who provided the details of the distress. The Yavapai County Sheriff's Office deployed a helicopter and emergency medical units to the scene. Rescuers pulled the miner from the shaft and transported him to a Phoenix hospital for treatment of multiple injuries.</p> <p>"Each rescue shows the SARSAT system works as planned," said Steve Volz, Ph.D., assistant NOAA administrator for its Satellite and Information Service. "Its life-saving ability is built on four decades of teamwork with the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Air Force, NASA and our international partners."</p> <p>By law, beacon owners are required to register their devices online with NOAA. The registration information helps provide better and faster assistance to people in distress, and reduces false alarms. It may also provide what type of help is needed.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Police departments struggle: recruit, retain
SOURCE	https://www.wlfi.com/news/national/police-departments-struggle-to-recruit-and-retain-officers-who-are-leaving-for-reasons-that-include/article_e143c539-0366-5c8c-93b9-af917ebfe42a.html
GIST	<p>In a growing number of American cities, if you call the police, there are fewer officers taking the call.</p> <p>Police departments across the nation are raising concerns about current and future staffing levels. CNN reached out to nearly 20 departments nationwide, along with other key stakeholders including elected officials, union officials and outside recruiters for departments for this story.</p> <p>They all point to similar concerns including Covid-19, the great resignation, the climate for law enforcement and local reform efforts that are making recruitment and retention difficult.</p> <p>The challenges have led the chief of police in Durham, North Carolina, to join her officers in patrolling her own city. The department is down 90 officers out of a budgeted force of 627. The department has started to offer a \$5,000 bonus for new hires to fill its ranks.</p>

"It's been tough," Chief Patrice Andrews said of the current staffing issues facing her city. "We've had to be very creative with staffing, you know, putting investigators and those that typically wouldn't necessarily be taking 911 calls, putting them back on the street."

"The 911 calls don't stop. People are still having emergencies, the emergencies don't stop and certainly the emergencies don't care if you are 60% staffed or below," Andrews told CNN while she was on patrol. "This profession is, is something we were all called to do and not everyone is meant to be the police. This profession is certainly a noble one, even yet and still, despite everything, this profession is certainly noble."

A national survey from June of 2021 found that departments around the country on average were filling 93% of budgeted positions available, according to the Police Executive Research Forum.

"You've got a workforce that's being compressed on the front end, you've got a drop in people who want to be cops. And on the other end, you have a significant increase in people who are resigning and retiring. And we have a survey that we did (that found a) 44% increase in retirements, 18% increase in resignations (in police departments)," according to Police Executive Research Forum President Chuck Wexler.

On average, officers spend 8 months training before they can patrol the streets alone, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Meaning, it will take years to fill the open jobs at departments across the country, Wexler said.

"It's a trying time to be a police officer in this country," Wexler said. "So, police chiefs are wondering who are going to be the cops of the future."

Departments are also struggling daily to cover those out sick due to Covid-19, and higher rates of crime, Wexler and several departments said.

In Philadelphia, the department is down 440 officers or 7% of the number of police officers budgeted for the city, the department told CNN.

"Well, right now it's not a very desirable job," John McNesby, head of the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), told CNN. "Everything that's been going on around the country for the last couple of years. ... But right now, I mean just getting people to apply is a monster in itself."

During a recent recruitment event, 600 people said they would attend, only 200 showed up and only 26 moved on to the physical assessment phases, McNesby said. The FOP also points to a recently passed requirement that requires all applicants to have lived in the city for at least a year, as an additional challenge to find new officers in the city of brotherly love.

In Atlanta, which like many cities in America also saw unrest in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, two incidents of police use of force also put pressure on the local community. Community outreach events like Clippers and Cops, held in local barbershops around the city, are trying to "bridge the gap" between the community and the police. The events allow officers to open a dialogue between themselves and the citizens who they serve and protect, participants say.

During an appearance at the event this month, Andre Dickens, the newly elected mayor of Atlanta, said he is working to get the police department back to full strength.

"The goal is to be smart on crime, and so we have to have a balanced approach to safety and justice," Dickens said. "That means getting more officers in because we lost about 400 to 500 officers over the past three years. So I'm trying to get those 400 officers back, but training them in conflict resolution and skills on how to de-escalate issues so that they can be better community-based cops."

The mayor said a number of issues contributed to the decrease in the rank and file. "There was a morale challenge across the last couple of years with Covid and with a lot of issues related to police, excessive use

of force that went unchecked, but then ... everybody said get rid of police and these sorts of things," Dickens said.

The founder of Clippers and Cops was one of those 400 officers who left the department. Detective Tyrone Dennis retired from the force in August 2020, moved back to St. Louis, Missouri, to be with his family and took a job as a director of school safety, a job that paid more than being a police officer.

"They got to do better with pay ... incentives to retain officers," he said. "It would be foolish for me to stay for \$48,000. When I have a wife and three kids to feed for \$48,000. I can almost qualify for public assistance. That's not cool," Dennis said.

"Basically we're one bullet away from death, and one mistake away from indictment so why roll the dice with my future when I can go do something else?" Dennis said.

Police leadership also say that pay should be more in line with work requirements. "When you think of what the line of work calls for and what they're having to do, they're wanting to be compensated, you know, but also to they've got to be able to support their families. You know, we have officers that can't even qualify for apartments because their, their income doesn't match up with what the apartments require. That's a problem," Andrews said.

In Phoenix, the police department is sending detectives and officers from various specialty assignments to patrol. Last month, the department started to take additional reports virtually rather than send officers out, police department spokesperson Sgt. Andy Williams told CNN.

The police department is down 13% of its allotment of officers, according to data provided by Phoenix Police to CNN.

It is offering hiring bonuses of up to \$8,700 dollars for new hires with college degrees, the department said.

In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Police Chief Catriana A. Thompson says the situation is "alarming." The department is down 96 officers or 18% of its allotted force. Some of the department's "specialized units have been disbanded temporarily until staffing levels improve," Thompson told CNN in a statement.

Reliant Hiring Solutions, a firm that works with law enforcement around the country to set up job fairs, said it was more difficult to find recruits in more "liberal cities," Randall Blanchard, told CNN.

In Seattle, the department is experiencing "unprecedented" losses of staff, the department told CNN. The department is short more than 225 officers or 17% of its workforce.

"Our losses over the last two years have been unprecedented," police department spokesperson Sgt. Randy Hyserik told CNN. "Many of our newer officers separated from our department and moved to smaller agencies in the area, and some left law enforcement altogether. In their exit interviews, many cited the 'defund' movement and a lack of support from local elected officials as their reason for leaving our department, or for leaving law enforcement completely."

Seattle's attrition rate has over doubled in the last two years. Prior to 2020, the annual attrition rate was 70 to 75 officers a year. The department has had 356 officers leave over the last two years, according to data provided to CNN by the department.

People that call police for non-life-threatening calls may have to wait longer for a response, unless staffing levels are improved, "you may be lucky if you get an officer 2, 3, 4 hours down the line," McNesby said.

"I mean it's easier for me to sit here and talk about it," McNesby said, "but it really affects the people standing at roll calls in the morning when they look to the left and look to the right and there's nobody else

	there ... or you have a citizen that's on the line ... where they feel the need for police attention and they dial 911 and you're not getting anybody coming."
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HEADLINE	02/02 When is pandemic over? Experts: not sure
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/2/when-will-pandemic-be-over-its-complicated-scienti/
GIST	<p>Don't expect President Biden or the World Health Organization to tell you when the COVID-19 pandemic is over. They're not sure themselves.</p> <p>While European nations and U.S. governors declare an end to the COVID-19 emergency and lift restrictions, the WHO says the pandemic is "nowhere near finished" and there is no formal mechanism for declaring the beginning or end of one.</p> <p>The ambiguity leaves a fragmented and uncertain route to an endemic phase, in which a virus is generally present and managed like other diseases.</p> <p>"There is no formal declaration of moving from a pandemic to endemic phase that I am aware of," said Dr. Timothy Brewer, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California, Los Angeles' Fielding School of Public Health. "For example, the human immunodeficiency virus pandemic has been going on for 40 years. HIV is endemic in some populations but has never been declared as such. Nor are there metrics that I am aware of."</p> <p>WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus made a splash when he labeled the coronavirus crisis a pandemic on March 11, 2020. He said it was a characterization and didn't change the U.N. agency's threat assessment or strategy.</p> <p>Still, the weighty label has been affixed to the crisis for nearly two years, and it's not clear how and when it will be peeled off.</p> <p>When the worldwide spread of any disease is brought under control to a local area, it is no longer a pandemic but an epidemic, according to WHO. If a disease is globally present but at expected or normal levels, it is not considered a pandemic but endemic — for instance, chickenpox or malaria.</p> <p>"A pandemic is a characterization of disease in view of its geographical spread," according to a WHO statement to The Washington Times. "The term carries no recognition under international law and there is no general, formal mechanism for declaring the beginning or end of a pandemic."</p> <p>Rather, the highest level of alarm under international law is the declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, which the WHO emergency committee revisits every three months. After its meeting in mid-January, it said COVID-19 remains an emergency of international concern.</p> <p>"Unlike the first SARS outbreak, where it was very clear there was an ending because there were no cases, this isn't going to go away," Dr. Brewer said. "It's going to circulate for a while. At some point, some people will just stop mentioning the word 'pandemic.'"</p> <p>For now, the U.S. and other nations are battling a fast-moving omicron variant that is causing record rates of infection, though it appears to cause milder disease. Vaccines are plentiful in the U.S., and other Western nations are maxing out who will take them to guard against severe disease, though the virus is expected to cause some level of infection in perpetuity.</p> <p>Some say the pandemic label will be removed once hospitalization and death rates drop and teacher shortages and other societal disruptions from the disease disappear. However, those metrics need to be sustained to consider an end to the pandemic phase.</p>

Temporary improvement in those metrics is “not sufficient alone because if you did it based on that, in June we were endemic,” said Julie Swann, a health systems expert who leads a team of pandemic modelers at North Carolina State University, referring to mild case levels last summer. “I look for not just a day or a week. I’m looking at over weeks to months.”

Experts said the closest thing to a formal declaration will be the WHO’s lifting of its public health emergency designation, though various countries and luminaries might start using the “endemic” lingo.

“Countries that have very high levels of population immunity from vaccines and prior infections will be first to move to an endemic phase. But leaders will also make different decisions in different countries, so we won’t see a single moment when the pandemic is over,” said Lawrence O. Gostin, a global health law professor at Georgetown University.

Some places have already declared an end to the emergency phase, no matter what it is called.

“The emergency is over. Public health [officials] don’t get to tell people what to wear; that’s just not their job,” Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, told Colorado Public Radio in December, explaining why he will not order another mask mandate.

Denmark this week became the first European country to lift all of its restrictions, including mask mandates and vaccine passes for bars. It cited the lower level of critical hospitalizations, despite rampant infection.

Norway is dropping restrictions on bars’ operating hours and said people don’t have to work from home anymore. France dropped an outdoor mask mandate, and Austria is making vaccines mandatory instead of trying to confine people in lockdown.

The Philippines will welcome tourists again on Feb. 10, and Hong Kong and South Korea are reducing quarantine times for international travelers.

As of Tuesday, people in San Francisco could go to gyms and offices without masks if they are fully vaccinated and boosted, or if they are unvaccinated and produce a negative test. Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties in Maryland lifted their mask mandates this week, citing declining positivity rates.

“From a societywide perspective, after two years on this hellish highway, it appears our country is finally arriving at the off-ramp,” Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, said in a floor speech Wednesday. “The virus appears to be heading endemic. Seventy percent of Americans agree with the statement, ‘It’s time we accept that COVID is here to stay and we just need to get on with our lives.’ It is time for the state of emergency to wind down.”

The get-on-with-it approach is making the WHO skittish. Officials cite the shape-shifting nature of the virus and ongoing crises in most parts of the world.

“Despite national, regional, and global efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic is nowhere near finished,” the WHO said. “Factors driving the current situation include variants of concern, inconsistent application of [public health and social measures], increased social mobility, and highly susceptible populations due to lack of equitable vaccine distribution. The pandemic continues to evolve with many variants of concern dominating global epidemiology. There is a strong likelihood for the emergence and global spread of new and possibly more dangerous variants of concern that may be even more challenging to control.”

Scientists point to the potential for new and dangerous variants that evade existing vaccines and treatments.

The wily nature of this pathogen sets it apart from Ebola, a virus that caused high-profile outbreaks in Africa over the past decade but had a clear beginning and endpoint and never reached a pandemic level of

threat. WHO considers Ebola outbreaks to be over if two incubation periods of the virus, or a total of 42 days, have elapsed after the last confirmed patient was discharged from care.

On the coronavirus, the health agency said it is dangerous to assume omicron will be the latest variant or that the world has entered the endgame of the crisis. However, it said the world can inch closer to ending the pandemic by vaccinating 70% of the population of every country and ensuring equal distribution of lifesaving tools and essential care.

“Each country is in a unique situation and must chart its way out of the acute phase of the pandemic with a careful, stepwise approach,” Dr. Tedros said on Jan. 24. “It’s difficult, and there are no easy answers, but WHO continues to work nationally, regionally and globally to provide the evidence, the strategies, the tools and the technical and operational support countries need.”

He said, “If countries use all of these strategies and tools in a comprehensive way, we can end the acute phase of the pandemic this year. We can end COVID-19 as a global health emergency, and we can do it this year.”

The White House has said the U.S. has the tools to enter a new phase in dealing with the virus but hasn’t detailed when that might be.

“The president’s view is that we’re not going to live like this forever. We don’t want to live like this forever,” press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday. “Our objective and our goal is on ending this pandemic as we end it today so it’s not something that is disrupting our daily lives. We’ll do more and more to protect people and accelerate the path out of this pandemic.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Russia: US military in ‘destructive step’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/ukraine-crisis-russia-criticises-us-military-moves-as-destructive-step
GIST	<p>The US decision to deploy more than 3,000 US troops in Germany, Poland and Romania is a “destructive step” that makes it harder to reach a compromise over Ukraine, Russia’s deputy foreign minister has said, as Moscow continues to build up its forces.</p> <p>Alexander Grushko said the move by US president Joe Biden would “increase military tension and reduce scope for political decision”, and would “delight” Ukrainian authorities, who would continue sabotaging the Minsk agreement “with impunity”. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 were designed to reach a political settlement in the east of Ukraine, including greater autonomy.</p> <p>The US on Wednesday said it was sending 1,700 troops from the 82nd Airborne Division to Poland, while a headquarters unit of about 300 from the 18th Airborne Corps will move to Germany and a 1,000-strong armoured unit was being transferred from Germany to Romania.</p> <p>The move is in response to Russia’s deployment of more than an estimated 125,000 troops within striking distance of the Ukrainian border, including nearly half of its available battalion tactical groups and support units.</p> <p>John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesperson, said the US movements were “designed to deter aggression and enhance our defensive capabilities in frontline allied states. We expect them to move in coming days.”</p> <p>The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, “continues to add forces, combined arms, offensive capabilities, even over just the last 24 hours he continues to add in western Russia and Belarus, and in the Mediterranean and the north Atlantic”, Kirby added. “He has shown no signs of being interested or willing to de-escalate the tensions.”</p> <p>The criticism from Moscow comes ahead of a fresh flurry of diplomacy.</p>

On Wednesday the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, warned Putin in a phone call that any further incursion into Ukraine would be “a tragic miscalculation”, according to Downing Street.

The Kremlin account of the call said that Putin had complained his demand for security guarantees had not been met and accused the Kyiv government of “the chronic sabotage” of the Minsk agreements.

On Thursday the Turkish president and wild card of Nato diplomacy, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, will fly to Kyiv to offer himself again in the role of mediator between Ukraine and Russia.

The Erdoğan mediation proposal has not yet been picked up by Russia but Jake Sullivan, US national security adviser, and Ibrahim Kalin, chief adviser to Erdoğan, spoke on Tuesday about their commitment to “deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine”, according to a White House statement.

France’s Emmanuel Macron was also due to speak to Putin on Wednesday evening, their third conversation in less than a week. German chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Wednesday night that he would meet Putin in Moscow soon, without providing a precise date.

Biden and Macron pledged to coordinate their response to the crisis in a phone call on Wednesday, while the French leader’s office said he would be talking to Putin again on Thursday evening.

The decision to deploy US troops follows diplomatic efforts that have so far failed to deliver any progress in defusing the crisis.

The Kremlin claims it has China’s support in the standoff – backing that would be demonstrated when Putin meets president Xi Jinping in Beijing on Friday.

Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte was the latest Nato leader to visit Kyiv on Wednesday in a show of support, meeting with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. After the talks, Zelensky said Ukraine was focused “only on peace”, but insisted it has the right to defend itself.

Rutte said it was “essential for dialogue to continue” between Russia and the other players.

There has also been exchange of documents over the past few weeks between the US, Nato and Russia setting out their respective positions on European security, and a series of phone calls between the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.

The US has suggested a number of areas for negotiation and possible confidence-building measures but has insisted there can be no compromise over Ukraine’s right to join Nato. The alliance has also stated that is non-negotiable. Russia’s central demand is for guarantees that Nato will not expand farther eastward.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Health officer: too early to declare victory
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3334042/snohomish-county-covid-pandemic-to-endemic/
GIST	<p>Snohomish County is making its way down the other side of the omicron wave, but challenges remain.</p> <p>Health Officer Dr. Chris Spitters said Tuesday that COVID-19 case rates in Snohomish County are down about 30% from the recent peak.</p> <p>“For the week ending Jan. 29, they came down about 30, 40%, consistent with projections that the infection wave will pass and decline pretty rapidly here through the early weeks of February,” he said.</p> <p>But Dr. Spitters also warned people not to start relaxing just yet.</p>

“Although declining, the rate of transmission in the community is still very high and several times higher than previous historical highs,” he said.

Hospitalizations are also down in the county by about a third, but the recent peak in January was twice as high as any previous peak, so the numbers are still quite high.

“The surge is still stretching depleted resources, and our hospital system is still under great stress,” Spitters said.

About 80% of those eligible in the county have had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

While the decline in omicron cases across much of Western Washington has some researchers at the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation believing we [could be close to shifting](#) from pandemic to endemic stage — where COVID would become more like the seasonal flu — Dr. Spitters says it’s too early to declare victory.

“On many occasions, we prematurely declared victory over COVID. I certainly hope that’s the case, but thus far no wave has been the last one, and I’m a little reluctant to make such a declaration,” he said.

“I don’t think it’s like a light switch — like we were [in a] pandemic and tomorrow it’s endemic,” Spitters noted. “It’s a transition.”

There are a lot of unknowns about what that transition will look like.

“What the course of nature and the interface between us and the virus is during that transition, I think does remain to be seen,” Spitters added. “We could get another variant that spreads rapidly or that makes people sicker.”

As for the omicron sub-variant seen around the world and in Washington state, Spitters says there are still too many unknowns to make any predictions.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Major storm delivers wintry mess for 90M
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/02/snow-ice-storm-midwest-east/
GIST	<p>A major winter storm is delivering a wintry mess to more than 90 million Americans, with winter storm watches and warnings stretching from New Mexico to Maine. Ice storm warnings cover parts of the Mississippi and Tennessee valleys, too, where upward of a half-inch of glaze will bring down trees and power lines and render travel virtually impossible.</p> <p>Cities including Dallas, Memphis and Little Rock are likely to experience ice storm conditions and face potential power outages through Thursday, while regions farther north will pick up heavy snow. A light glaze of ice could extend as far southeast as Houston Thursday, which was placed under a winter weather advisory.</p> <p>The storm had already unloaded over a half foot of snow in Denver and Chicago between Tuesday night and Wednesday. At least 6 to 10 inches of new snow is possible across parts of the Midwest, including St. Louis, Indianapolis, Toledo and Detroit through Thursday.</p> <p>On Wednesday evening, snow, sleet and freezing rain were increasing across northern Texas and Oklahoma as the storm’s second wave, poised to surge east, was taking shape.</p> <p>The National Weather Service called the storm “large, prolonged, and significant.”</p> <p>In the interior Northeast, more than 10 inches of snow could fall in Buffalo, Syracuse, N.Y., and Burlington, Vt., late Thursday into Friday.</p>

A messier stew of sleet, freezing rain, snow and rain is anticipated in eastern New England on Friday, where crashing temperatures may induce a flash freeze that could turn roads into skating rinks.

Meanwhile, flooding is a possibility on the system's warm side in the Deep South. Thursday will feature isolated severe thunderstorms across southeastern Louisiana, southern Mississippi, southwestern Alabama and the Florida Panhandle, with tornado activity a possibility.

Only days ago, a historic nor'easter plastered the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic with up to 30 inches of snow, the storm giving Boston the snowiest calendar day in the city's recorded history, with nearly two feet having fallen.

Storm preparations and effects

In Texas, where a deadly winter storm last year caused a massive power grid failure, local officials expressed cautious optimism about their preparation.

"The city is in a much better position as far as our preparation and readiness for this event," the director of the Dallas Office of Emergency Management, Rocky Vaz, said Tuesday, according to local reports. The city also announced a temporary shelter at Fair Park's Automobile Building for those experiencing homelessness.

In Austin, [where a glaze of ice is predicted](#), Mayor Steve Adler told local station KVUE there were "a lot of lessons to be learned from a year ago."

Adler added: "This does not appear to be going to be as extensive or as long as what we saw in the past, but it's going to get cold tonight."

Still, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) said "no one can guarantee" that the storm will not cause power blackouts.

"But what we will work and strive to achieve — and what we're prepared to achieve — is that the power's going to stay on across the entire state," he said during a briefing.

In Memphis, ahead of updates from Weather Service that areas are under ice storm warnings, the office of emergency management said to "take time now to prepare for power outages."

At least three universities in Kansas — Wichita State University, Kansas State University and the University of Kansas — announced campus closures because of the weather, with KU encouraging community members to stay off grounds to allow for snow removal.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker (D) issued a disaster declaration and activated about 130 members of the state National Guard to help deal with expected blizzard conditions. The state Transportation Department also planned to deploy more than 1,800 trucks and equipment to treat roads and respond to weather emergencies, the state said.

Officials in St. Louis County said their top concern was power outages, the "care of our residents should they lose power in these cold temperatures, and stranded motorists," said Michele Ryan, the county's emergency management director.

She encouraged people to check road conditions if going out was critical — but to largely avoid travel for the next two days.

Ryan, like other leaders nationwide, urged preparedness, especially if venturing out: Remember to fill gas tanks, and keep emergency kits and chargers on hand.

"But mostly, I would encourage all of you to stay home — we've become very good at working from home over the last two years," she said. "If you have that ability, please take advantage of it."

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson (R), who also activated the state's National Guard ahead of the storm, wrote on Twitter that "severe winter weather isn't something we are strangers to here in the State of Missouri, but we must be prepared for the worst."

More than 2,000 flights had been canceled Wednesday, while an additional 2,600 were scrubbed for Thursday, including 92 percent of those at Dallas's Love Field.

During the first half of Wednesday, Weather Service offices in [Kansas City](#), [St. Louis](#) and Chicago reported hazardous, snow-covered roads and numerous accidents. In St. Louis, the temperature [had dropped more than 30 degrees in 24 hours](#) as the snow piled up.

The snow then streaked through northern Indiana and into southern and central Michigan.

The heaviest snow from the first wave had generally focused in a swath from Jefferson City, Mo. through Chicago into Kalamazoo, Lansing and Flint, Mich.

Flint, Mich. had registered 10 inches of snow, a new Feb. 2 calendar day record.

The storm as of overnight Wednesday

By Wednesday night, the first wave of snow had exited Kansas, St. Louis and Chicago, while snow was lingering in Cleveland and Detroit.

Meanwhile, a second wave of frozen precipitation was organizing from northern Texas to Kansas. Due to mounting accidents, Oklahoma City Police [tweeted](#) it was no longer responding to non-injury crashes. "Roads are getting slick, so please slow down if you're out & about," it wrote.

In Dallas, rain had changed to freezing rain by around 8 p.m. local time. "Don't travel unless you absolutely have to," [tweeted](#) the Weather Service in Fort Worth.

Snowfall totals through 10 p.m. Wednesday night Central time included:

- 10 to 12 inches around Peoria, Ill.
- 9 to 12 inches around Denver
- 6 to 10 inches around Chicago
- 8 inches around South Bend, Ind.
- 8 inches around Springfield, Ill.
- 6 inches around Wichita
- 4 to 6 inches around Jefferson City and Columbia, Mo.
- 4 inches around Detroit
- 2 to 4 inches around Oklahoma City
- 2 to 4 inches around Kansas City and St. Louis

To the southeast, flood watches blanketed much of northern and central Alabama, northwest Georgia, middle Tennessee and southeast Kentucky, where a heavy rainfall will persist through Thursday. Rain was coming down across most of Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky, and were predicted to total up to 3 to 5 inches.

Where ice will be a primary hazard

The wintry mix of frozen precipitation over northern Texas and Oklahoma will gradually expand eastward and southward into Thursday.

Ice is expected to build up in Dallas as temperatures dive into the 20s.

"Power outages and trees damage will be possible due to the ice," the [Weather Service wrote](#) in its winter storm warning for the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

During the day Thursday, sleet and freezing rain could reach as far southeast as Houston.

On Thursday, the freezing rain will also extend northeast along the Ohio River, with significant ice buildup in northern Kentucky and southern Ohio. Some freezing rain may even make it into Pennsylvania.

A glaze to a quarter inch of ice is possible in cities such as Dallas, Memphis and Lexington, Ky., with up to a half-inch possible in Jonesboro, Ark., Louisville and Evansville, Ind. Cincinnati could see a moderate glaze too.

“Travel is strongly discouraged,” wrote the National Weather Service in Memphis. “If you must travel, keep extra blankets, food, water and a flashlight in your vehicle in case of an emergency. Prepare for possible power outages.”

Models indicate that some freezing rain is possible in the Northeast and interior Mid-Atlantic in the Friday time frame. Central Pennsylvania, in particular, could see serious icing.

Heavy snows likely

To the north of the ice zone, heavy snow will fall in a swath from northeast Oklahoma through Missouri, the northern Ohio Valley and into interior New England. Cities including St. Louis, Indianapolis, Toledo, Cleveland, Syracuse and Rochester, N.Y. and Burlington, Vt. could all wind up with double-digit snowfall totals.

Behind the first round of snow tapering off Wednesday night, a second round will develop into Thursday, displaced slightly to the south from roughly northeast Texas and eastern Oklahoma into northern Ohio, probably staying southeast of Chicago. That second wave will sweep across the interior Northeast on Thursday night into Friday.

There may be pockets along the Interstate 70 corridor of eastern Missouri, central Illinois and northern Indiana that wind up with nearly a foot when all is said and done, as both waves of snow will transit those areas. If Indianapolis receives a foot or more, it will mark the city’s sixth-heaviest snowstorm on record. Bookkeeping there dates back to World War II.

The long-duration event could feature snowfall through very early Friday in northern Ohio, meaning a 36-hour window of inclement weather. Northern New England will see moderate to heavy snows possibly topping a foot on Thursday night and Friday, but precipitation should clear the coast Friday night.

In southern New England, precipitation will begin as rain before transitioning to freezing rain, sleet and snow as temperatures plummet along and behind the front. Any liquid or slush that falls will quickly freeze up late Friday night, making for treacherous travel conditions. Initial rainfall will also preclude effective pretreatment of roadways with salt and other chemicals.

Thereafter, a frigid weekend is store.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Olympian: Covid troubles inside Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/02/03/covid-omicron-variant-live-updates/
GIST	<p>With the Winter Olympics set to commence Friday, thousands of athletes are flying to China and entering what Beijing calls a “closed loop” system, in which Games attendees and support staffers are strictly cut off from the outside world to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.</p> <p>A spokesman for the municipal government said during a Wednesday news briefing that the covid situation in the capital is “overall controllable” and “headed in a good direction.” The city reported three new coronavirus cases on the same day.</p>

	<p>But a tearful video posted on social media Wednesday by a Belgian skeleton racer drew attention to covid troubles from within the Olympics community. Kim Meylemans, 25, who tested positive when she arrived in Beijing in late January, detailed how an ambulance that was supposed to transport her to the Olympic Village after her isolation instead took her to another facility. Meylemans was eventually allowed to enter the Village after Olympic officials intervened.</p> <p>There had been 287 confirmed positive cases among Olympic arrivals as of Wednesday, 102 of them athletes and team officials. From the United States, that includes four-time Olympian Elana Meyers Taylor, Team USA's top medal hope in bobsled, and her husband, Nic Taylor, an alternate on the men's bobsled team.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Study: 135M years of life lost in pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/02/americans-have-lost-135-million-years-life-during-pandemic/
GIST	<p>Edward Daniels was 53 years old when he died of covid-19 at a hospital on Long Island in April 2020, in the early months of the coronavirus's emergence in the United States. In an obituary published by the New York City news site the City, part of a series focused on the deaths of those who succumbed to covid-19, Daniels's wife remembered him as not just a family man, but a "community hero." Someone who gave of himself for others.</p> <p>Until his death. Actuarial tables from 2019 suggest that a 53-year-old man would have been expected to live another 27 years, meaning that Daniels's death from covid deprived his family of a father and his community of a hero for nearly another three decades. Daniels's death, in other words, wasn't just a loss of life. It was a loss of years of life. Nearly 30 years, gone, thanks to the virus.</p> <p>New research from Hanke Heun-Johnson and Bryan Tysinger conducted for the University of Southern California's Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics looks at that same equation for all of the unexpected deaths that have occurred since the pandemic began. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calculates a metric called "excess deaths," a comparison between the number of deaths recorded in the United States and the number of deaths that would be expected based on prior years' trends. It allows them to spot things like exceptionally bad flu seasons, for example. Those data are also how we know that the number of deaths from covid-19 is not exaggerated: Hundreds of thousands more people have died over the past two years than we otherwise would have expected.</p> <p>And according to Heun-Johnson and Tysinger, those excess deaths have stripped away a cumulative 13.5 million years of life.</p> <p>It's an immense number and one that necessarily keeps growing. A similar analysis from the team last summer put the total at about 9 million years of life — meaning that the total has grown by about 50 percent since then.</p> <p>"The deaths keep shifting younger and younger in the U.S. population," Tysinger explained in a Zoom call on Wednesday. "When we wrote the paper the first time, we were amazed at the average years of life lost per person who died. And it's only gotten worse."</p> <p>Again, remember the math here. A 30-year-old who dies contributes about half a century to the cumulative total, while a 90-year-old who dies of covid contributes much less. If more young people are dying, the cumulative toll increases more quickly. CDC data breaking down deaths by age shows that — particularly during the delta variant wave last summer — deaths among those under the age of 65 surged. In August, 2 in 5 deaths were among people below that age.</p> <p>Perhaps the most dramatic effect Heun-Johnson and Tysinger found was in the disproportionate distribution of those lost years of life by race. Older Americans had more cumulative years of life lost than did Americans under the age of 65 simply because so many more older people died. But within each of</p>

those age groups — over and under 65 — it was Black and Hispanic men and women who lost disproportionately more years of life relative to population.

This is not simply a function of vaccination rates. Hispanic Americans are [as likely to be vaccinated](#) as are White Americans at this point, with Black Americans trailing a bit. There have been disparities in the past that are wider, so we can't simply assume that none of it is vaccination. In fact, much of it probably is. But it's also likely that the divide derives to some extent from factors like health vulnerability and income.

Again, Heun-Johnson and Tysinger aren't looking specifically at covid-19 deaths but excess deaths in general, which raised an interesting complication that Heun-Johnson pointed out when we spoke. The CDC normally uses a five-year window to build the baseline against which weekly deaths can be compared to figure out what constitutes a normal level of death. But since we're now two years into a pandemic that's leaving thousands of people dead a day, the CDC has had to adjust its processes.

"The algorithm is falling apart," Heun-Johnson said, "which is just pretty sad," given what it implies about the scale of mortality.

For all of the talk about how vaccines have reduced the risk of hospitalization and death from the virus, it is still the case that more than 45,000 people have died on average in each of the past six months. There's something of a plateau in the death toll since September, one that arose with the delta variant, faded a bit and then began to spike again with the omicron variant. It's a plateau that exists despite more than half of the population being fully vaccinated.

January, more than a year after vaccines first became available, was the fourth deadliest month on record for the pandemic. The omicron wave has been [far deadlier here](#) than in other wealthy countries around the world.

But, then, the United States has been an outlier in its covid death toll. The country has consistently made up a larger percentage of covid deaths in a month than it does the world's total population, according to numbers from [Our World in Data](#). In only two months, our toll has been disproportionately low instead of disproportionately high. The United States makes up more than 3.6 times as much of the cumulative global death toll as we do the global population.

This is absolutely in part because not all countries report deaths accurately or in a timely way. But, again, even compared with other wealthy countries that cannot be credibly accused of misrepresenting data, we're faring poorly. In part, that's because our [vaccination efforts fell short of what experts had hoped](#) — though the scale of vaccination has helped keep deaths lower than they would otherwise have been.

Of course, our vaccination efforts fell short in large part because they became intertwined with partisan politics. The places that have seen the most covid-19 deaths relative to population are consistently places that vote [more heavily Republican](#). Republicans make up [most of the unvaccinated population](#).

More than 880,000 American lives have been cut short by a disease for which a vaccine exists that can almost entirely reduce the risk of death. Those lives are not, as some would suggest, simply elderly Americans who would have died imminently for other reasons. It includes a lot of people who had years, decades of life in front of them — 13.5 million years, in fact.

It included a lot of people like Edward Daniels — heroes to their communities and beloved members of families — who were taken far too soon.

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HEADLINE	02/02 WHO: rush to ease rules? Not so fast
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#global-virus-restrictions-us-states

Nightclubs in Denmark are reopening, and the government no longer considers Covid a “[socially critical disease](#).” Norway is dropping its coronavirus test requirements for fully vaccinated travelers. France is ending its outdoor mask mandate. Unvaccinated [Austrians](#) are no longer confined to their homes.

In several European nations, pandemic protocols are being eased as public support for them has waned and the approach shifts instead to [treating the virus as endemic](#), or a manageable part of life. Now some parts of the United States, where the Omicron wave has crested, are heading in that direction, with several state leaders saying it is time to be realistic about pandemic fatigue.

“We’re not going to manage this to zero,” Gov. Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat, said on Sunday on the NBC News program “Meet the Press.” “We have to learn how to live with this,” he said.

Norway’s easing of restrictions may be the most drastic. There is no longer a limit there on how many people can gather at events, either indoors or outdoors. At movie theaters, churches and elementary schools, social distancing rules are gone. Restaurants can once again serve drinks past 11 p.m. Colleges and universities are being urged to strive for full in-person instruction. [And working from home is no longer required.](#)

As of Tuesday, fully vaccinated travelers entering Norway are exempted from testing requirements, easing a rule that has been integral to international travel since the pandemic began. (Travelers who are not fully vaccinated still face testing requirements.) Norway also shortened its minimum isolation period to four days for people who test positive but show no symptoms.

Also on Wednesday:

- **France** eased outdoor mask rules and capacity limits for concert halls, stadiums and other events.
- [Switzerland](#) said it would relax its remote work and quarantine edicts, effective Thursday.
- The prime minister of the **Czech Republic** said the country would [end its testing requirements](#) for schools and workplaces on Feb. 18.
-

Finland said earlier in the week that it intended to lift all its restrictions this month, and England is expected to roll back restrictions soon as well.

Several Asian governments are moving to ease rules for arriving international travelers:

- On Tuesday, **Thailand** resumed allowing fully vaccinated travelers into the country without quarantine, after a five-week suspension.
- The **Philippines** said it would reopen to tourists from most countries on Feb. 10, and no longer require fully vaccinated travelers to quarantine in a government facility.
- **Hong Kong** is reducing its quarantine period for international travelers to 14 days, down from 21, effective Saturday.
- **Indonesia** will open the tourist island of Bali to all international travelers on Friday.

But public health leaders at the World Health Organization have urged caution about relaxing restrictions too hastily. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the W.H.O.’s director general, said at a Tuesday news conference that it was “premature for any country either to surrender, or to declare victory” over the virus.

“We’re concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines, and because of Omicron’s high transmissibility and lower severity, preventing transmission is no longer possible, and no longer necessary,” Dr. Tedros said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

In the United States, indoor mask mandates have recently expired in several cities, including Denver, Hartford and San Francisco. New York State’s mask requirement is effective through Feb. 10, and it is unclear whether it will be extended; Gov. Kathy Hochul has said no decision has been made.

Before Omicron’s arrival, Seema Lakdawala, a respiratory virus expert at the University of Pittsburgh, [estimated that masks could come off](#) by February. Now, she said, she is surprised that more states haven’t put new mask mandates in place.

	<p>“I’m not sure anywhere at the moment is in a place that there is sufficient decrease in cases, at least in the U.S., to warrant taking off mask mandates,” Dr. Lakdawala said, adding that she was “hopeful we’ve turned a corner,” but wanted to see more weeks of the virus trending down.</p> <p>The U.S. has recently been averaging about 424,000 new cases a day, a figure that is falling but remains far higher than in any earlier surge in the pandemic, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>Nationwide, about 140,000 patients are hospitalized with the virus, another figure that remains higher than in any previous surge. The nation is averaging more than 2,600 deaths a day, fewer than the peak last winter but still rising.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Latin America, Caribbean vax rates vary
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#vaccination-rates-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-are-all-over-the-map-the-who-says
GIST	<p>About 60 percent of the people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated against Covid, but World Health Organization officials warned on Wednesday that the inoculation rate varies widely from country to country, posing significant risks for some regions.</p> <p>“Despite our progress, vaccination remains uneven,” Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, the director of the Pan American Health Organization, a division of the W.H.O., said at a news conference.</p> <p>Dr. Etienne said the vaccination rates in 14 countries and territories in the Americas had yet to exceed 40 percent of the population. Another 14 have had better success, fully vaccinating 70 percent of their populations, she said.</p> <p>Among the laggards are Guatemala at 32 percent, Jamaica at 21 percent and Haiti at less than 2 percent, according to government figures compiled by the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford.</p> <p>The hemisphere’s middle- and low-income countries in particular have struggled, and more than 54 percent of people living in them have yet to receive a single dose of vaccine, according to P.A.H.O.</p> <p>Overall, Dr. Etienne said, 63 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean regions have been fully vaccinated, and P.A.H.O. has set a goal of increasing that figure to 70 percent by the middle of the year.</p> <p>Dr. Etienne said shortages of vaccine doses, a constraint many nations faced last year, were no longer a problem. Between direct donations, purchases by P.A.H.O. and increased shipments from the United Nations-backed Covax program, Dr. Etienne said, “countries will have enough stock to implement mass rollouts” of vaccines in 2022.</p> <p>The challenge has been to organize robust vaccination programs that can bring those doses to people in remote areas. Many Caribbean islands, for example, do not have strong vaccination programs that can ensure high coverage, Dr. Etienne said.</p> <p>She noted that some countries that had early Omicron surges were now seeing declines in new case reports. “These trends show that we must continue to sustain every part of our Covid response,” Dr. Etienne said. “Vaccinations, testing, and continuing public health measures like mask wearing and social distancing remain crucial.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Russia pledge: deepen ties with China
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/world/ukraine-russia-news#on-the-eve-of-his-meeting-with-xi-putin-pledges-to-deepen-ties-with-china
GIST	<p>BEIJING — Ahead of his visit to Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympics, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia pledged on Thursday to deepen his country’s diplomatic and economic ties with China in ways that would counter American power and influence.</p> <p>In an article as well as a separate interview with Chinese state media, Mr. Putin did not mention the churning confrontation with the United States and its allies over Ukraine. But he said he and China’s leader, Xi Jinping, would coordinate foreign policy “based on close and coinciding approaches to solving global and regional issues.”</p> <p>As the Ukraine crisis has unfolded, China has become increasingly outspoken in its support of Russia’s positions, complicating President Biden’s strategy of deterring any Russian attack by threatening to impose a punishing economic and diplomatic cost.</p> <p>Last week, China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, after speaking with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, declared that any political resolution should address “Russia’s legitimate security concerns.”</p> <p>Mr. Putin is scheduled to meet with Mr. Xi in Beijing on Friday, and he suggested that they would discuss a variety of issues, including trade and business deals, cooperation in lunar exploration and plans to create financial mechanisms that would “offset the negative impact of unilateral sanctions.”</p> <p>Such sanctions have been the pillar of the American and European responses to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, much to the fury of Mr. Putin and other senior Russian officials and businessmen who have been subjected to them.</p> <p>On Friday evening, Mr. Putin is scheduled to attend the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Games, joining dozens of foreign dignitaries, including other heads of state.</p> <p>In the article Mr. Putin wrote for the Chinese state news agency Xinhua, he appeared to chide Mr. Biden and other leaders for declaring that diplomats from their countries would not attend the ceremony, as a protest against China’s human rights abuses.</p> <p>“Sadly, attempts by a number of countries to politicize sports to the benefit of their ambitions have recently intensified,” Mr. Putin wrote. “This is fundamentally wrong and contrary to the very spirit and principles of the Olympic Charter.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Russia military buildup continues
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/ukraine-russia-news?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News#satellite-imagery-captures-russias-steady-military-buildup-near-ukraine
GIST	<p>Even as President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia claims the United States is trying to goad Russia into war with Ukraine, new satellite imagery shows no sign of a slowdown in Moscow’s military buildup.</p> <p>One image, taken on Feb. 1, shows an entire new housing area next to an existing deployment of military vehicles in Novoozernoye, in Russian-occupied Crimea. The personnel camp was established within the last 10 days, according to a New York Times analysis of additional satellite imagery.</p> <p>The establishment of tents and shelters for troops may signal an increased “overall readiness level,” according to an analysis by the Colorado-based company that released the images on Wednesday, Maxar Technologies.</p> <p>Breaking a monthlong silence, Mr. Putin said Wednesday that while he hoped diplomacy would continue, the West had ignored Russia’s demands.</p>

The Russian leader has repeatedly cast his country not as the aggressor but as a victim of NATO expansionism — but the new imagery, along with information from independent military analysts, confirms the enormous scale of Moscow’s military buildup.

Russia has massed about 130,000 troops on the Ukrainian border, by Western estimates. Its [troops, tanks and heavy artillery](#) have encircled the border from the north, east and south, according to information obtained by Ukrainian and Western officials, as well as independent military analysts and satellite imagery.

The images released Wednesday also show the deployment of weaponry across Ukraine’s border in Belarus, including Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems, as well as local training exercises at multiple sites.

There were also signs of live-fire exercises. At the Persianovsky training area in western Russia, multiple new craters from recent artillery fire stand out in the snow-covered landscape.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Ukraine not opposed to US plan
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/ukraine-russia-news?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News#ukraines-foreign-minister-endorses-a-us-plan-to-ease-tensions
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine’s foreign minister said Wednesday his government does not object to Washington’s proposal to help defuse the Ukraine crisis by promising not to deploy American missiles or troops in Ukraine.</p> <p>The U.S. proposal is intended to assuage what Moscow has said is a key security concern for Russia.</p> <p>The Biden administration included it in a letter from the U.S. ambassador in Moscow to Russia’s foreign ministry last week. The proposal was obtained and published on Wednesday by El País, the Spanish daily, and confirmed to The New York Times as accurate by a senior European official.</p> <p>The proposal addresses a concern President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has raised repeatedly in recent months as his military massed troops near Ukraine’s borders: that if Ukraine joins NATO, short-range missiles could be deployed that could reach Moscow in mere minutes.</p> <p>The American offer, however, was not a clear-cut concession to Russia. It was part of a proposal for reciprocal commitments by both Russia and the United States to refrain from deploying the offensive military capabilities in Ukraine. The United States now has no offensive missiles or combat troops in Ukraine.</p> <p>“I would like to note that while the United States has neither missiles nor combat units in Ukraine, Russia has both,” Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine’s foreign minister, said in a video call with foreign reporters. “And if this proposal is accepted on a reciprocal basis, that will imply that Russia has to withdraw. So, no, we have no objections against the idea of Russia withdrawing its forces, its personnel and its weapons from the territory of Ukraine.”</p> <p>Mr. Kuleba said Ukraine and the U.S. have similar assessments of the threat of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine.</p> <p>Just last week, Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and President Biden seemed to take starkly different positions on the threat Russia poses to Ukraine. The United States has said an attack could come at any day, while Mr. Zelensky has urged Ukrainians to remain calm and put their trust in a diplomatic resolution.</p>

	<p>But Mr. Kuleba said Washington and Kyiv are on the same page regarding the Russian threat. “Ukraine and our partners, including the United States, have no difference in assessing risks of current Russian escalation,” Mr. Kuleba said, thanking the U.S. for mobilizing international support for Ukraine.</p> <p>“The tone of voice of our messages may sound different,” Mr. Kuleba said. “But the actual assessment is the same: Everything is possible, and we should be preparing for every possible scenario.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Energy prices complicate climate policies
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/climate/oil-gas-prices-climate-change.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Climate%20and%20Environment
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — While world leaders have vowed to scale back the use of fossil fuels to help keep a lid on global warming, a drastic upheaval in the markets for oil, natural gas and coal could complicate the shift toward cleaner sources of energy.</p> <p>Global oil prices have soared to their highest level in seven years, nearing \$90 per barrel, as fears grow of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Europe is in the grips of a severe natural gas crunch that has roiled energy markets worldwide. And global demand for coal, the dirtiest of all fossil fuels, has surged to record highs as economies bounce back from pandemic lows.</p> <p>There’s a broader lesson here, energy experts said. Even as governments and businesses invest in low-carbon energy sources like wind and solar power, the world will remain deeply reliant on fossil fuels for years to come. Unless that transition is carefully managed, many countries could face volatile energy prices and other disruptions that, in turn, threaten to undermine support for policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.</p> <p>Here are four big trends to watch.</p> <p>Higher Oil Prices, More Drilling?</p> <p>After the coronavirus pandemic struck in 2020, global investment in oil and gas projects declined by 30 percent and has been slow to recover. But global demand for oil has snapped back faster and is projected to reach records this year, as economies rebound. Supplies have struggled to keep up.</p> <p>On top of that, recent geopolitical turmoil — including supply disruptions in Kazakhstan and fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine — have lifted oil prices to their highest levels since 2014.</p> <p>Although Western oil companies have been drilling fewer wells since the pandemic began, partly held back by investors wary of unprofitable projects, high prices could shift that calculus. On Tuesday, Exxon Mobil announced it would increase spending on new oil wells and other projects by up to 45 percent this year after reporting \$23 billion in profits for 2021, its best result in seven years.</p> <p>Carbon Tracker, a London-based think tank, cautioned last week that higher oil prices may lead energy companies to invest billions in new drilling projects that could undermine international efforts to fight climate change.</p> <p>In the United States, rising gasoline prices — currently averaging \$3.40 per gallon, a dollar higher than a year ago — have been a drag on the approval ratings of President Biden, who is struggling to persuade Congress to pass climate policies aimed at reducing fossil-fuel emissions. At the same time, the Biden administration has defended moves to issue new oil and gas permits on public lands, although those efforts have been slowed by federal courts.</p> <p>But high oil prices aren’t always bad news for clean energy. They can also depress oil demand by, for example, pushing people to buy electric vehicles that don’t require gasoline. Last year, electric cars made</p>

up 20 percent of all new sales in Europe and 15 percent of new sales in China, [according to BloombergNEF](#), a research group.

A Gas Shortage Roils Europe

In recent months, the world has struggled with spiking prices for natural gas, a fuel used in both power plants and home heating, that [has caused ripple effects across the globe](#). Utility bills have soared from Italy to South Korea, while fertilizer plants in Britain and Germany have had to curtail operations. (Natural gas is a key ingredient in nitrogen-based fertilizer.)

The causes of the gas crunch are numerous: Global demand has rebounded faster than supply since the pandemic began; lower output from hydropower dams in China and Brazil have led to a surge of gas imports; a cold snap last spring across Europe increased demand and reduced gas inventories.

The crisis is particularly acute in Europe, where natural gas prices are now five times as high as they were a year ago. Officials are [racing to procure new shipments of gas from overseas](#) in case Russia, which provides one-third of Europe's natural gas, curtails supplies in the event of a conflict over Ukraine.

There are also signs the gas crunch [could undermine unity](#) within the European Union over policies to fight climate change.

Officials are currently debating a sweeping new set of clean-energy measures aimed at cutting emissions by 2030. Some nations, like Spain, have called for a faster shift away from fossil fuels to reduce Europe's exposure to gas markets. But others, like Poland, [have urged a delay in stricter climate action](#) amid the crisis.

And there's the possibility that skyrocketing energy prices could bolster unrest akin to the "Yellow Vests" protests in 2018, which forced the French government [to backtrack on plans](#) to increase fuel taxes as a way to reduce emissions.

Coal Reaches Record Highs

Across the globe, rising natural gas prices have provided a boost to coal, which typically produces twice as much carbon dioxide as gas when burned for electricity, driving up planet-warming emissions.

Global coal consumption reached a record in 2021 and was on track to rise further in 2022, the International Energy Agency [recently said](#). That was partly because electricity demand is surging in countries like China and India, and investment in renewable energy has not kept pace. But high natural gas prices have also spurred many electric utilities to turn to coal.

The United States is one example. Over the past decade, as advances in fracking led to a boom in domestic gas production, the country [has become one of the world's largest exporters](#) of liquefied natural gas.

Those exports have become a key source of global supply during the latest crisis. But they have also boosted natural gas prices at home, which in turn means that some utilities are finding it economical to run their coal plants more often. Last year, U.S. coal power emissions [increased 17 percent](#) after years of falling steadily, putting the country further off course from reaching its climate goals.

"It really illustrates how much we've depended on cheap natural gas prices to keep coal in decline," said Kate Larsen, a partner at the Rhodium Group, a research firm. "Overall, we still expect coal to decline further in the years ahead, but unless there are new policies put in place to clean up the power sector, the coal industry could see a bit of a lifeline if there are big swings in the gas market."

A Bumpy Transition

In a [recent essay](#), Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, argued that climate change policies were not to blame for the current global energy crisis. But, he warned, "that does not mean that the road to net zero emissions will be smooth."

	<p>One problem, he said, is that while many countries have cut back on investments in fossil fuels like oil and gas in recent years, energy demand is still rising, and nations have not spent enough on cleaner sources like wind, solar or nuclear power to fill the gap. If the world wants to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels — a goal many leaders have endorsed to avoid the worst consequences of climate change — global investment in clean energy would need to triple from current levels by 2030.</p> <p>Mr. Birol also noted that, because many countries will remain reliant on fossil fuels for years to come, they will need to take steps to prepare for market disruptions, such as improved gas storage in Europe or energy efficiency measures that can blunt the damage from rising prices. “This needs to happen quickly,” he wrote, “or global energy markets will face a turbulent and volatile period ahead.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Racial disparities in rejected mail ballots?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/us/mail-voting-black-latino.html
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Among the thousands of mail-in ballots that were rejected in Washington State during the 2020 election, auditors have found that the votes of Black residents were thrown out four times as often as those of white voters.</p> <p>The rejections, all of them because of problematic signatures, disqualified one out of every 40 mail-in votes from Black people — a finding that already is causing concern amid the national debate over voter access and secure balloting. Washington, a state with broad experience in mail-in balloting, found that rejection rates were also elevated for Native American, Hispanic, and Asian and Pacific Islander voters.</p> <p>State officials said there were no signs that ballots cast by Black or other minority voters were knowingly singled out by poll workers, or that any of the ballots were deliberately falsified; the rejections were a result of signatures that were missing or did not match those on file, a possible result, the officials said, of voter inexperience, language problems or other factors.</p> <p>“It’s not acceptable, quite frankly,” said State Auditor Pat McCarthy, a Democrat, whose office conducted the audit. She urged election officials to take steps to address the disparities.</p> <p>The findings in Washington State mirror mail-ballot research that has been conducted in other states in recent years, including Georgia and Florida. But they are crucial in a state like Washington, which in 2011 became the second state to adopt all-mail balloting, behind Oregon. Mail-in voting has been an option for all statewide elections since 1991.</p> <p>Turnout in states with all-mail balloting has been among the nation’s highest, and is often seen as a key to attracting voters who may not otherwise cast ballots because of the challenges of work, child care or transportation. It has become an increasingly popular option during the pandemic, with 43 percent of voters around the country casting their ballot by mail during the 2020 general election.</p> <p>Republicans have passed legislation in recent months to curtail mail voting, expressing concerns that mail ballots may be more vulnerable to fraud, intimidation or loss in the mail. President Donald J. Trump falsely claimed that mail elections would be rigged by ballots printed in foreign countries and children raiding mailboxes. Washington and other states with all-mail voting have seen little evidence of fraud, noting the bar codes, tracking and data-verification systems used to monitor ballots both before and after the election.</p> <p>Democrats and voting rights advocates have called for making the mail ballot option more readily available, and a growing number of states have done so.</p> <p>Eight states now send every voter a mail-in ballot by default, even as many of them continue to operate in-person polling places. Some states have allowed mail-in balloting for county or city elections. All states have some option for absentee ballots for voters who cannot make it to the polls on Election Day.</p>

LaTosha Brown, a co-founder of the organization Black Voters Matter, said mail balloting is critical for expanding access, including to Black voters, who historically have faced legal and practical impediments to voting. She said it was essential to address the widespread rejection seen of mail ballots.

“That shouldn’t be concerning just for me as a Black American,” she said. “That should be concerning for anyone who cares about democracy.”

In Washington State, counties mail ballots to all voters about three weeks before an election. Voters have until Election Day to fill out the ballot, sign the envelope and return it — either in one of a series of drop boxes or by mail, as long as it is postmarked by Election Day. Election officials check the voter’s signature on the envelope against voter registration records to ensure a match and then process the ballot for counting.

Auditors found nearly 29,000 ballots that were rejected for various signature problems in the 2020 general election — either the signature was missing or it did not match what was on file. Looking for signs of bias, the state examined thousands of accepted and rejected signatures more closely, but the auditors largely agreed with the decisions that county election workers made and found nothing in the way the ballots were reviewed that would explain the disparity.

Other groups that had higher rejection rates were men, younger voters and less-experienced voters of all races and ethnicities. The audit also found that rejection rates varied by county, a difference the auditors said could reflect varying degrees of strictness in matching signatures.

Young voters who frequently vary their signatures and language barriers for some racial and ethnic groups could also explain some of the rejections, the auditors said.

Ms. McCarthy recalled that her own ballot was once rejected with a mismatched signature, with one featuring a shortened version of her first name and one her full name plus a middle initial.

Election officials are supposed to notify voters to give them an opportunity to resolve discrepancies. The audit focused on ballots that did not get resolved.

The disparities found in other states with rejected ballots mirrored those found in Washington. Researchers examining [mail-in votes from the 2018 election in Georgia](#) found that racial and ethnic minorities were more likely to have their on-time ballot rejected compared with white voters. Similar disparities were found during [the 2018 election in Florida](#) by researchers working with the American Civil Liberties Union, a review that also found disparities for younger voters, first-time voters and military personnel. Journalists have found similar trends in [North Carolina](#) and [Colorado](#) — and previously in [Washington State](#).

Last year, two advocacy groups filed suit against a few counties in Washington State alleging discrimination against Latino voters and other racial minorities because of a comparatively higher rate of rejection of ballots from voters with Latino names. A Latino judge in the case recused himself, noting that his own ballot signature had been initially rejected during the previous election.

Ms. McCarthy, the state auditor, said she remained a strong supporter of mail-in voting, and said the audit that identified the disparities was one attempt to continue improving the voting system.

Her office’s report recommended that counties educate voters on the importance of having a matching signature, including an explanation of the signature-matching process, with targeted efforts among communities with higher rejection rates. It also suggested collecting several signature samples from each voter and renewing efforts to help voters fix mismatch problems when they arise.

Ms. Brown, the Black Voters Matter representative, said she would like to see the elimination of signature-verification checks altogether, saying that the process introduced the possibility of biased decisions from those who review the ballots, and also posed challenges for people who have changed how they write their names.

	<p>Robert Stein, a political science professor at Rice University who specializes in voting and elections, said some researchers have explored using personal identification numbers instead of signatures to avoid mismatch problems. But he said the core of the problem was probably inexperienced voters who made mistakes on their ballots.</p> <p>“The question is, what can the state do to improve that?” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 DOH: 1,355,428 cases, 10,845 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257968113.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 10,252 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday.</p> <p>The state reported 7,512 new cases on Tuesday. As of Wednesday, the state’s preliminary death tally was 10,845. That number is up by 69 since Monday.</p> <p>The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 16 was 10,535 The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,355,428 cases on Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Hanford new nuclear waste removal system
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Hanford-begins-1st-large-scale-treatment-of-nuke-16826330.php
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — Workers on a former nuclear weapons production site have started the first large-scale treatment of radioactive and chemical wastes from large underground storage tanks, a key milestone in cleaning up the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, the U.S. Department of Energy said Wednesday.</p> <p>Hanford for decades made plutonium for the nation's nuclear arsenal and is the most radioactively contaminated site in the nation's nuclear weapons complex. It was created by the Manhattan Project and made the plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, at the end of the World War II.</p> <p>William White, Energy Department senior advisor for environmental management, called the new \$130 million cesium removal system a major milestone.</p> <p>“The importance of this achievement can't be overstated,” White said, adding that it would eventually transform the Hanford site.</p> <p>The newly operational system removes radioactive cesium and solids from waste stored in huge underground tanks at Hanford. The treated waste will be stored until it is sent to the nearby Waste Treatment and Immobilization Plant, where it will be converted into a glass-like substance for long-term storage. That plant, under construction since 2002, comes online next year, the agency said.</p> <p>“This is an exciting new era in our Hanford cleanup mission,” said Brian Vance, manager of DOE’s Office of River Protection at Hanford. “For the first time in Hanford site history, we are treating a significant amount of tank waste on an industrial scale.”</p> <p>Hanford tank operations contractor Washington River Protection Solutions — working with Energy Department staff, other site contractors and regulatory agencies — built, installed and tested the cesium removal system.</p> <p>The technology is nearly identical to a system operating at DOE’s Savannah River Site in South Carolina, which also made plutonium, the agency said.</p> <p>Hanford contains approximately 56 million gallons of radioactive waste stored in 177 underground tanks, representing one of DOE’s largest environmental risks and most complex challenges. The tank waste is a</p>

result of nearly five decades of plutonium production that supported national security missions and helped end World War II, the DOE said.

“This is a win,” Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, who used to represent the Hanford area in the U.S. House, said in a pre-recorded statement. Inslee noted that the wastes stored inside the tanks, some of which are leaking, could eventually threaten the nearby Columbia River.

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., called the news “a monumental step” in the cleanup of Hanford.

But it is one step.

Finishing the cleanup of Hanford, located near Richland in southcentral Washington, will cost an estimated \$300 billion to \$640 billion, and take until about 2078, according to a Department of Energy report published at the end of January.

The 580-square-mile (1,502-square-kilometer) Hanford site, located along the Columbia River, produced almost two-thirds of the plutonium for the nation’s nuclear weapons program from World War II through the Cold War.

DOE is spending about \$2.5 billion annually on environmental cleanup of the wastes, plus contaminated buildings, soil and groundwater. But the estimated costs to finish most cleanup by 2078 would require much larger annual budgets.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Deputy mistaken shooting in prior shooting
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Deputy-who-mistakenly-shot-officer-cleared-in-16826734.php
GIST	<p>VANCOUVER, Wash. (AP) — A Washington state sheriff’s deputy who mistakenly shot and killed an off-duty police officer over the weekend had been involved in a prior fatal shooting.</p> <p>Authorities identified the Clark County deputy as Jonathan Feller, who joined the sheriff’s office in 2018.</p> <p>Feller shot and killed off-duty Vancouver police officer Donald Sahota, 52, on Saturday night, as Sahota was chasing a robbery suspect who happened to show up at Sahota’s house.</p> <p>In October 2020, Feller was one of three Clark County deputies who fatally shot Kevin Peterson Jr., an armed, 21-year-old Black man, as he ran from a drug deal outside a Hazel Dell motel, The Columbian newspaper reported. The Pierce County prosecutor ruled that shooting justified.</p> <p>Feller served as a law enforcement officer in South Dakota for several years before being hired by the Clark County Sheriff’s Office, according to the Lower Columbia Major Crimes Team, which is investigating Sahota’s death. He has been placed on critical incident leave.</p> <p>Sahota was off-duty at his home on Saturday night when a man started banging on his front door, saying he’d been in a car crash and needed help. Sahota’s wife called 911 and learned that the man matched the description of a suspect in a gas station robbery.</p> <p>Authorities say that Sahota’s wife informed the dispatcher that her husband was an armed, off-duty officer who was going outside to detain the suspect.</p> <p>The suspect began fighting with Sahota in the driveway and stabbed him repeatedly before breaking free and running into the house. Sahota chased after the suspect and was shot and killed on his front porch by Feller, who had just arrived.</p> <p>The suspect, identified as Julio Cesar Segura, 20, is being held on \$5 million bail for investigation of attempted first-degree murder, robbery and other charges.</p>

HEADLINE	02/02 Western WA cases, hospitalizations drop
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/covid-cases-still-coming-down-hospitalizations-begin-to-ease-in-western-wa/
GIST	<p>Coronavirus cases are sharply declining in Western Washington and hospitalizations are showing signs of slowing as the surge of omicron cases that has stressed hospitals could be subsiding, health officials say.</p> <p>According to the state Department of Health's most recent complete data, Washington recorded a seven-day average of about 1,543 infections per 100,000 people in mid-January. A week prior, the state's average was about 1,720 per 100,000.</p> <p>COVID-19 hospitalizations are still rising statewide, but there are signs the numbers are beginning to level off, particularly in Western Washington, said state Secretary of Health Dr. Umair A. Shah.</p> <p>"We are hopeful there is some good news we're starting to see when it comes to the trajectory of cases related to omicron not just in the state of Washington, but across the nation," Shah said. "That is welcome news."</p> <p>He noted that numbers in Eastern Washington will likely lag behind those in Western Washington, and remain on the upswing for a while longer before leveling off.</p> <p>Franklin and Whitman counties in Southeastern Washington currently have the highest infection rates in the state, with more than 5,000 cases per 100,000 people, according to DOH data. Yakima, Walla Walla and Douglas counties have infection rates of over 4,000 per 100,000, while San Juan and Jefferson counties have the lowest rates, with fewer than 1,350 per 100,000 people.</p> <p>King County's case rate is about 1,963 per 100,000.</p> <p>"This is what I affectionately call a light at the end of the tunnel," state epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist said Wednesday.</p> <p>With no evidence of any new variants circulating in the state or an increase in cases, Lindquist said he's comfortable categorizing the trend as a definite decrease in cases rather than a blip in numbers.</p> <p>Still, the state is counting 50 to 70 deaths per day, he said, even though the current death rate isn't as high as it was during past surges involving other variants.</p> <p>"This is still a very significant pandemic at this point — it's just got some signs of it going down," Lindquist said. "... Clinics are starting to decompress a little bit and some hospitals are getting a little more breathing room."</p> <p>Those who are unvaccinated are also still much more likely to be hospitalized than those who have received immunizations, he added — for those between 12 and 34, the likelihood is five times higher than for vaccinated people.</p> <p>The state's health care system, however, is still holding its breath for the wave of omicron cases expected to hit eastern counties, particularly those near the Idaho border.</p> <p>Idaho public health officials last week activated crisis standards of care for many southern Idaho hospitals, citing staffing and blood supply shortages, Shah said.</p> <p>Another concern in Washington, he said, is that local blood supplies are also at "emergency levels." He urged people to donate blood — particularly those who are O positive — as soon as possible, if they're able.</p>

“This is a really difficult time for every state, but in particular, our focus as the state of Washington is Washingtonians,” he said. “So we’re doing everything we can to support our health care system within the borders of Washington.”

Test demand high

While infection numbers have declined, demand for coronavirus tests remains high.

The DOH’s website, sayyescovidhometest.org, where Washington residents can order rapid coronavirus tests to be sent to their homes, was out of tests on Wednesday evening, a couple of days after the state restocked and reopened the site. A department spokesperson said officials are hopeful the next round of tests will go out next week.

To date, the state has distributed 2.1 million free, rapid tests through the website and has promised to deliver an additional 1.4 million once kits arrive in Washington.

“We do know that all the tools related to vaccines and wearing a mask and policy tools, as well as the rapid spread of omicron across our state, has given us a tale of two responses,” Shah said. “On the one hand, we’ve had success and we’ve been very pleased with that.”

He continued, “But it’s far too early for us to say ... we’re out of the woods.”

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HEADLINE	02/02 Judge denies 4 SPD officers’ injunction
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/judge-again-denies-request-to-block-release-of-records-revealing-seattle-officers-who-attended-rally-before-capitol-riot/
GIST	<p>For the second time in less than a year, a King County judge has rejected a request to block the city of Seattle from disclosing records that would identify police officers who participated in a pro-Donald Trump rally in Washington, D.C., before last year’s attack on the U.S. Capitol.</p> <p>In a written order signed Tuesday, Superior Court Judge Sandra Widlan denied the motion for a preliminary injunction filed by four Seattle officers who want to prevent their identities from being disclosed in records requested by members of the public.</p> <p>The judge also extended a stay on her ruling for seven days, giving the officers — known as “John Does” in court documents — a chance to appeal her ruling. If they don’t appeal by Feb. 8, the city can release records identifying the officers to Seattle University law student Sam Sueoka and others who’ve asked for them under the state’s Public Records Act.</p> <p>Aric Bomsztyk, an attorney hired by the Seattle Police Officers Guild to represent the officers, said in an email Wednesday his firm planned to challenge the latest ruling.</p> <p>“We appreciate the Court’s time, but we are disappointed with the ruling,” Bomsztyk said. “There are important privacy and Constitutional interests which need to be recognized and upheld. We plan on appealing the Court’s decision.”</p> <p>Janet Thoman, one of the attorneys representing Sueoka, said Wednesday her team is “pleased that we prevailed again, that the PRA prevailed again.”</p> <p>“And that’s what this is all about — the public’s right to know this information and have access to these records,” she added.</p> <p>Thoman also noted that appeals delaying an ultimate resolution of the matter were “unfortunate, but we’re going to keep at it. We’re not going anywhere.”</p>

Sueoka contends the police identities are a matter of public record and citizens should have the right to know if publicly employed officers are engaging in off-duty conduct, such as the “Stop the Steal” rally before the Capitol insurrection, that throws their professionalism into question. The officers argue their names should be kept private because they attended the rally off-duty to express free speech rights as private citizens, and would face harassment and threats if they’re identified.

Widlan’s latest ruling comes about 11 months after [she denied the officers’ initial request for an injunction](#) to block release of the records, ruling against their privacy arguments because their “actions in this case were public, they are part of a public event.” A stay of Widlan’s March 2021 order was issued while the officers appealed it.

While the case was under appeal, the city’s Office of Police Accountability [completed and released the findings of a six-month investigation](#) of the six officers who attended the rally. It concluded two of the officers — a married couple who have since been fired and identified in the media as Alexander Everett and Caitlin Rochelle Everett — had trespassed on restricted grounds outside the Capitol during an “active insurrection.”

Three of the other four officers were cleared of allegations of unprofessional conduct and did not break any laws, the investigation found. Evidence wasn’t conclusive as to whether the fourth officer broke any rules or laws.

After the appeal reached the state Supreme Court in November, Chief Justice Steven C. González ruled that circumstances in the matter had changed so much since Widlan’s initial ruling that the officers’ appeal was “moot,” and [the case was sent back to the trial court](#). Last month, the four officers who remained unidentified filed a new injunction motion, renewing a legal process that started a year earlier.

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HEADLINE	02/02 New Zealand plans to fully reopen
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases?type=stylIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#new-zealand-reopening-border
GIST	<p>New Zealand will ease the strict border controls and quarantine rules it has maintained during the pandemic under a five-stage plan announced by the prime minister on Thursday, gradually reopening to travelers from abroad over the next nine months.</p> <p>New Zealanders in Australia will be able to return home beginning at the end of February without spending time in hotel quarantine, the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, said at a news conference to announce the changes to the border policy.</p> <p>“Families and friends need to reunite,” she said. “Our businesses need skills to grow. Exporters need to travel to make new connections. It’s time to move again.”</p> <p>Starting just before midnight on Feb. 27, New Zealanders and other eligible travelers who have received at least two doses of a vaccine against Covid-19 will be able to travel home from Australia. On March 13, the border will reopen to vaccinated citizens arriving from elsewhere in the world.</p> <p>Vaccinated New Zealanders will still be required to isolate at home, with the length of their isolation determined by the country’s “close contact” policy at the time of their arrival. New Zealanders who are not vaccinated must still spend time in quarantine, and the government is evaluating facilities designed for that purpose.</p> <p>Noncitizens will also be able to return in phases starting in March, beginning with essential workers and skilled workers earning at least 1.5 times the median wage, as well as the family members of high-skilled workers already in the country. In April, the border will reopen to up to 5,000 international students and temporary visa holders.</p>

Then in July, Australians and all other travelers who can normally enter the country without a visa, including tourists from the European Union and the United States, will be able to come to New Zealand. Finally, travelers who require a visa will be allowed to enter the country in October, Ms. Ardern said.

Ms. Ardern said the July date for letting in travelers with visas was “the latest we expect this to begin.”

“There is a high likelihood of this date coming forward as we progress through the next stage of the pandemic,” she said.

New Zealand closed its borders in March 2020, imposing a strict hotel quarantine requirement for citizens. After October 2020, however, it began to limit the number of people who could enter the country’s hotel quarantine, creating intense bottlenecks among the throngs of New Zealanders desperate to return home.

A staged plan to reopen was outlined late last year, but was deferred after the more contagious Omicron variant caused cases to soar around the world.

The country’s border policies were in the global spotlight this week after Charlotte Bellis, a former journalist for Al-Jazeera based in Kabul, Afghanistan, spoke publicly about her difficulty securing a spot in New Zealand’s hotel quarantine in order to return to the country to give birth. The government currently faces legal challenges to its border policies from a group of expatriate New Zealanders called Grounded Kiwis.

At the news conference, Ms. Ardern defended the hotel quarantine system, known as MIQ, even as she acknowledged that the closures had been difficult for many people. “The anguish of MIQ has been real, and heartbreaking. But the choice to use it undeniably saved lives,” she said.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Vaccine younger children safe, effective?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases?type=styl-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#the-surgeon-general-assures-parents-vaccines-for-young-children-will-get-a-rigorous-fda-review
GIST	<p>The surgeon general sought to reassure parents who are nervous about their toddlers and preschoolers being vaccinated against the coronavirus, after federal regulators took a step toward authorizing vaccines for young children despite questions about their effectiveness.</p> <p>Dr. Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general, said Wednesday during a White House briefing that Pfizer’s application for emergency authorization by the Food and Drug Administration would “undergo the same independent, rigorous and transparent review process” that was used to authorize Covid-19 vaccines for adults.</p> <p>Parents of young children are especially wary about the vaccines. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, released on Tuesday, found that roughly 30 percent of parents of children younger than 5 now say they intend to vaccinate their children as soon as shots become available for that age group.</p> <p>Pfizer and its partner, BioNTech, asked the Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday to authorize two doses of their coronavirus vaccine for children younger than 5 while the companies continue to research whether three doses would be more effective for that age group.</p> <p>Federal regulators had pressed the companies to submit the request even though two doses failed to produce the hoped-for immune response among children 2 to 4 years old in a clinical trial. Only children between 6 months and 2 years old demonstrated an immune response comparable to that of older teenagers and young adults, the standard for a successful trial.</p> <p>The disappointing results, announced in December, prompted the companies to test a third low dose of the shot in that age group, and those studies have not been finished yet. But rather than wait until the end of</p>

March for the results, federal regulators encouraged [Pfizer](#) to apply for authorization of a two-dose regimen now in hopes of getting a head start on the vaccination effort.

Officials argued that two doses had proved safe, even if they failed to produce an adequate immune response in the whole age group, and that if children can get an initial injection this month, they will be ready for a third dose by the time researchers have results from the three-dose trial, according to multiple people familiar with the discussions.

Dr. Janet Woodcock, the acting F.D.A. commissioner, said on Tuesday that it was important to act quickly given the rapid rise in cases from the highly infectious Omicron variant, which has now peaked in many parts of the country, and the likelihood that other variants would follow.

Dr. Murthy also cited the Omicron variant as the reason the administration was more urgently reviewing vaccine data on young children. That wave of cases has revealed more about how vaccinated and unvaccinated people fare against the virus.

“Whether that changes the risk-benefit profile is what the F.D.A. will be assessing,” he said. There are more than 19 million U.S. children under 5, and they are the last remaining Americans not yet eligible for vaccination.

“For much of this pandemic, millions of parents have carried with them an added layer of worry, knowing that their children under 5 didn’t have protection from Covid the way older vaccinated children do,” Dr. Murthy said, noting that his own 4-year-old daughter is also too young to be vaccinated. “That’s why I am hopeful that we may be one step closer to having an added layer of protection for our younger children.”

Jeffrey D. Zients, President Biden’s coronavirus response coordinator, said the administration was working closely with state and local health departments, doctors and pharmacies “to ensure the vaccine is available at thousands of locations nationwide.” The administration has already secured the necessary needles and supplies, designed for young children, he said.

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HEADLINE	02/02 UAE: drones intercepted; 4th attack
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uae-hostile-drones-intercepted-4th-attack-82631858
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- The United Arab Emirates intercepted several drones fired at the country Wednesday, the UAE military said, the fourth such attack on the federation in recent weeks.</p> <p>A little-known group that previously claimed a January 2021 attack targeting a palace in Saudi Arabia said it was responsible, an assault that authorities believe came from Iraq. That raises the possibility the Emirates now is being targeted from its north and south after three recent attacks launched by Yemen's Iran-backed rebels.</p> <p>The rebel Houthis have claimed responsibility for the past few drone and missile attacks on the UAE — strikes that have widened Yemen’s 7-year-old civil war and fueled regional tensions.</p> <p>In a short statement just before midnight Wednesday on Twitter, the Emirati Defense Ministry said it had destroyed three “hostile drones” that targeted the UAE at dawn. It said the interception occurred “away from populated areas,” without elaborating.</p> <p>The acknowledgement came several hours after an online account associated with Awliya Wa’ad al-Haq, or “The True Promise Brigades,” claimed it had launched “four drones targeting vital facilities in Abu Dhabi.” The group said it launched the attack in retaliation for the Emirates' policies in both Iraq and Yemen.</p> <p>It wasn't immediately possible to clarify the discrepancy in the number of drones allegedly used in the attack. The Emirati's two-sentence statement also offered no details about the direction of the attack.</p>

The group has threatened the Emirates in the past after its one known attack, a Jan. 23 attack last year on the Yamama Palace in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Both Iraqi and American officials believe that Saudi attack originated from Iraq.

The Washington Institute for Near-East Policy has suggested the brigade has ties to Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades. That Iran-backed group is on a U.S. list of terrorist organizations and is accused by U.S. officials of targeting American forces in Iraq. The group is separate from the Lebanese group of the same name.

The Emirates has previously been threatened by Iranian-backed groups in Iraq over their belief the UAE interfered in Iraq's recent parliamentary elections.

The Houthis have been battling a Saudi-led coalition that includes the UAE since 2015 after the rebels took control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa. The war reached Emirati soil for the first-known time last month, when the Houthis fired drones and missiles at the country. U.S. and Emirati forces have jointly intercepted the past two aerial attacks, including one earlier this week as Israel's president began a historic visit to the Gulf Arab country.

Another attack in mid-January killed three workers from India and Pakistan and wounded six others.

The Houthis' media office also attributed the attack to "The True Promise Brigades."

The UAE said it was ready "to deal with any threats and is taking all necessary measures to protect the state."

The escalation has threatened the UAE's reputation as a rare haven for international business in a region mired in conflict and collapse. Expats outnumber locals in the Emirates nearly nine to one.

On Wednesday, the British Foreign Office updated its travel guidance to the UAE to note: "Further attacks are very likely."

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HEADLINE	02/03 Pakistan: separatists launch twin attacks
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/troops-15-separatists-killed-twin-attacks-pakistan-82643496
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD -- Separatist insurgents launched twin attacks on military posts hours apart in southwest Pakistan, triggering intense firefights that killed four soldiers and 15 assailants, the country's interior minister said Thursday.</p> <p>In a video statement, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said nine militants and four soldiers were killed when the assailants raided a security post Wednesday evening in the remote Naushki district of Baluchistan province. He said six militants were also killed when separatists attacked another security post in the province's Banjgur area.</p> <p>The Baluchistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the twin attacks in a post on Twitter. Ahmed said both attacks were repulsed by the security forces.</p> <p>The military initially gave a lower casualty report, saying four militants and a soldier had been killed.</p> <p>Separatists and militants have regularly staged attacks in restive Baluchistan in recent years. Last week, militants killed 10 soldiers in an attack on a security post there.</p> <p>The separatists demand independence from the central government in Islamabad. Authorities say they have quelled the insurgency, but violence in Baluchistan has persisted.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 US stands firm over membership to NATO
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/world/europe/us-nato-response-russia-demands.html
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — The United States has offered to provide more transparency about missile deployments in Eastern Europe in response to Russian security demands, but it rejected Moscow’s insistence that NATO guarantee it would never expand to countries near Russia, including Ukraine, Sweden and Finland.</p> <p>The offer was included in the American response to Russia’s demands for security guarantees in Eastern Europe, which the United States and NATO delivered to Moscow last week, as fears escalated in the West about the large Russian troop buildup surrounding Ukraine from both Russia and Belarus.</p> <p>The American and NATO responses were obtained and published on Wednesday by El País, the Spanish daily, and confirmed to The New York Times as accurate by a senior European official. At a briefing on Wednesday, John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, also confirmed the documents.</p> <p>“I note that in the past few hours a proposal made by the United States leaked to a European news outlet,” Mr. Kirby said. “We did not make this document public, but now that it is, it confirms to the entire world what we’ve been saying.”</p> <p>The broad outlines of the American and NATO responses were known from public statements by both the West and Russia. The disclosure of the documents provides a deeper level of detail.</p> <p>A NATO official said that “we never comment on alleged leaks.”</p> <p>Moscow issued its security demands in mid-December, as the West sounded alarms about a potential invasion of Ukraine. Among the most contentious were Russia’s insistence that Ukraine must never be allowed to join NATO, and that the West scale back its military presence to mid-1990s levels. The American and NATO responses, delivered last week, rebuff those demands.</p> <p>President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia said in Moscow on Tuesday that his government was still “carefully analyzing” the responses, but that his most pressing demands were being ignored. He described the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO as a fundamental threat not just to Russia, but to world peace.</p> <p>If Ukraine were to align itself fully with the West and acquire NATO weapons, he suggested, it might start a war against Russia to recapture Crimea — which Russia annexed in 2014, a move unrecognized by the international community. That, he said, could lead to war between Russia and the NATO bloc.</p> <p>Mr. Putin, whose renewed troop buildup along Ukraine’s borders created the crisis, has regularly expressed concern that NATO’s Aegis missile-defense systems in Romania and Poland could also fire offensive Tomahawk cruise missiles at Russia. NATO and Washington insist that the systems are only defensive and are not aimed against Russia but against other possible adversaries, like Iran.</p> <p>In its response, the Biden administration proposes a reciprocal “transparency mechanism” under which Russia could verify the absence of offensive missiles at the sites in Romania and Poland, while the United States would do the same at two missile-launching bases of its choice in Russian territory; one would likely include Kaliningrad, the slice of Russia bordering two Eastern European NATO members, Lithuania and Poland.</p> <p>Moscow has stationed intermediate-range missiles in Kaliningrad that can be fired with both conventional and nuclear warheads, one reason the United States and its allies abandoned the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, known as the I.N.F. Treaty, in 2019.</p> <p>Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, endorsed on Wednesday another of the United States’ proposals to help defuse the crisis: an assurance that it would not deploy offensive missiles or permanently base ground troops in Ukraine. The proposal was presented to Russia as contingent on consultations with the Ukrainian government.</p>

The United States and its 29 NATO allies have no combat troops or missiles in Ukraine and have for months said that they have no intention of deploying offensive military capabilities to the country — or of fighting for it against Russia, since Ukraine is not a member of the alliance and thus does not enjoy its commitment to collective defense.

NATO promised in 2008, however, that Ukraine and Georgia could one day join NATO, a pledge that [infuriated Mr. Putin](#), whose goal is to maintain a sphere of Russian influence in the region. The Russian president has been trying to ensure the door remains shut ever since, something the United States has refused to consider.

The offer to rule out future U.S. deployments did, however, address a concern Mr. Putin has raised repeatedly in recent months as his military massed troops near the Ukrainian border: that if Ukraine were to join the alliance, short-range missiles could reach Moscow in flight times of mere minutes.

But it was not a clear-cut concession to Russia. The proposal called for reciprocal commitments by both Russia and the United States to refrain from deploying missiles or troops in Ukraine.

“I would like to note that while the United States has neither missiles nor combat units in Ukraine, Russia has both,” Mr. Kuleba said in a video call with foreign journalists. “And if this proposal is accepted on a reciprocal basis, that will imply that Russia has to withdraw. So, no, we have no objections.”

The flurry of diplomacy on the Ukraine crisis is proceeding along two broad tracks, one between Russia and the United States and NATO that included the exchange of published demands and written replies, the other a preparation for a summit of the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine.

Mr. Kuleba said he remained hopeful, in part simply because the diplomacy was continuing despite warnings from Western governments, which started months ago, that an intervention could begin in December or January.

“What is reassuring is that we already see diplomacy is working,” Mr. Kuleba said. “Now we are at the beginning of February and the diplomatic efforts continue.”

The United States also proposes negotiations with Moscow on other arms-control measures, announced publicly in Washington in the past. They include a rapid effort to create a treaty to replace the [current New START treaty](#) limiting intercontinental-range missiles, and talks to enhance transparency on military exercises and reduce the risk of accidental conflict.

The United States is also prepared to discuss another Russian concern, known as the “indivisibility of security.” That commitment refers to the idea that nations may not seek to increase their security at the expense of another state’s security.

Russia insists that the eventual membership of Ukraine in NATO would adversely affect its security. The U.S. said it disagreed but would be willing to discuss the issue.

But Washington rejected the idea of any restraint on the rights of any sovereign country, wherever located, “to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance.”

Both Washington and NATO also rejected the Russian demand that they negotiate separate treaties with Moscow that would require them to remove all troops and equipment from NATO member countries that border Russia, including Poland and the Baltic States.

Instead, Washington insists that NATO’s enhanced forward battalions in Poland and the Baltic countries, established after Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatists in eastern Ukraine, were not “permanent,” since they rotate. It also said that a total of some 5,000 troops did not constitute “substantial combat forces,” in accordance with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act.

	<p>Instead, the documents say that “further Russian increases to force posture or further aggression against Ukraine will force the United States and our Allies to strengthen our defensive posture.”</p> <p>The documents the United States and NATO provided to Moscow are relatively general in tone and do not attempt to draft treaty language. Instead, they set out for Russia where the United States and NATO are prepared to engage for negotiations once Russia de-escalates around Ukraine.</p> <p>The texts describe in more detailed form the messages that Western leaders have conveyed in public to the Kremlin. The United States and NATO coordinated their responses, with U.S. officials saying that every point involving other governments including Ukraine was discussed with them.</p> <p>El País did not describe how it obtained the documents; the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, said on Wednesday that Russian authorities had not released them.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Punxsutawney Phil: 6 more weeks winter
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2022/02/02/Groundhog-Day-Punxsutawney-Phil/2431643808149/
GIST	<p>Legendary weather prognosticator Punxsutawney Phil emerged from his burrow Wednesday morning at 7:25 a.m. and saw his shadow, which means that there will be six more weeks of winter.</p> <p>Phil's anticipated prediction drew thousands of onlookers to the small western Pennsylvania town of Punxsutawney for the first time since 2020 after the event was held virtually in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Of course, Phil isn't the only forecaster capable of long-range weather outlooks. AccuWeather's team of meteorologists released its own spring forecast for the U.S. Wednesday morning.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Drug OD suicides rise among teens, seniors
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2022/02/02/drug-overdose-suicides/1781643814480/
GIST	<p>Suicides by drug overdose have increased among teens, young adults and seniors, even as they declined for the overall population, U.S. federal researchers say.</p> <p>Drug-related suicides declined for Americans in general during the latter part of the 2010s, researchers from the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found.</p> <p>But rates of suicide by overdose among 15- to 24-year-olds rose, as did those for 75- to 84-year-olds. These deaths fall into the same pattern of "deaths of despair" also linked to accidental overdoses and suicide by other means, said study co-author and NIDA director Dr. Nora Volkow.</p> <p>"Both of them are likely driven by the same isolation and lack of mission," she said.</p> <p>The study only looked at drug-related overdoses between 1999 and 2019, but Volkow said it's likely the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the problem.</p> <p>"It's likely that the numbers will be worse, perhaps, during the pandemic," Volkow said.</p> <p>Nadine Koslow, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, agreed.</p> <p>"As this pandemic goes on longer and longer, we're going to see more of that," said Koslow. "In general, we need to be concerned about these deaths of despair."</p>

For this study, NIDA researchers analyzed data from death records, looking for drug overdose deaths that occurred as a result of [suicide](#).

About 5% to 7% of overdose deaths are recorded as intentional, although Volkow said the number is probably higher, because not all suicide victims leave a note or other indication that they intended to kill themselves.

The suicide rate increased among 15- to 24-year-old males from 0.6 deaths per 100,000 in 2015 to 0.8 in 2019. It rose among females in that age group from 0.6 in 2014 to 1 in 100,000 by 2019.

"Young people are in a vulnerable age range, where their brains are still developing and factors like executive function and control are not in place yet. This can affect impulsivity and coping," said Dr. Smita Das, chair of the American Psychiatric Association's Council on Addiction Psychiatry. "They often also don't access health care enough by virtue of being healthy otherwise."

It's also an age of profound change, and Koslow noted that some young adults have trouble handling the shifting sands beneath their feet.

"This is the age when you're trying to figure out if you're going to be in college, if you're going to get a job, when you're going to leave home. It's a highly vulnerable group, and the stress of all this clearly has impacted them," Koslow said.

The same holds true in some ways for seniors, for whom overdose suicide rates went up even more, essentially doubling.

The rate of suicides by drug overdose rose among 75- to 84-year-old men from 0.7 per 100,000 in 2001 to 1.6 in 2019. The rate among women in that age group went up from 0.8 per 100,000 in 2001 to 1.7 in 2019.

"I think the 75- to 84-year-old group of people are like, OK, I'm not working anymore, what am I going to do with my life, my health is starting to fail? This is going wrong, that's going wrong. Really, what's meaningful in my life and what do I have next to look forward to?" Koslow said. "I think that group is particularly vulnerable."

There also was a concerning uptick in drug overdose suicides among Black women, rising from 0.4 per 100,000 in 2013 to 0.7 in 2019.

Koslow said she was "particularly shocked" to see the increase in intentional overdoses among Black women.

"There has been some evidence of death by suicide rates going up in the African American community, but this group of Black women has been historically very protected and had quite low rates because of strong family ties and strong religious beliefs," Koslow said. "This has been historically a very low risk group. So I think it's concerning to see that's not so clearly the truth anymore."

Screening for signs of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts should become a regular part of healthcare for teens and young adults, Volkow said.

"When children or adolescents go to the doctor, this should be part of the process, and if there is evidence of symptoms suggestive of mental disorders, you should actually do an intervention," Volkow said, adding that parents also should be taught to look for signs of distress in their kids.

Outreach to seniors is also needed, to help them deal with the changes that occur in their lives following retirement, Koslow said.

	<p>"If I got as many pieces of paper that told me how to cope with that stage of my life as I do about my choice of Medicare policy, it would be really wonderful," she said. "As you're thinking about retiring, you need help figuring out what you're going to do that matters in life. I think we don't do that at all. We just don't help people prepare."</p> <p>The new study was published Wednesday in the American Journal of Psychiatry.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Ottawa anti-vax mandate protests continue
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/refile-anti-vaccine-mandate-protesters-say-they-will-block-ottawa-long-necessary-2022-02-02/
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Feb 2 (Reuters) - Truck drivers who have been blockading downtown Ottawa for six days on Wednesday said they had no intention of leaving the Canadian capital until the government scrapped COVID-19 vaccine mandates.</p> <p>Despite increasing complaints from residents about noise, pollution and aggressive behavior from some truckers, Ottawa police have declined to end the protest, citing the risk of aggravating tensions.</p> <p>The demonstration began as a move to force the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to drop a vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers. It has since turned into a more populist anti-Trudeau movement.</p> <p>"We understand your frustration ... but the responsibility for your inconvenience lies squarely on the shoulders of politicians," protest leader Chris Barber said in a statement to Ottawa residents.</p> <p>"We are here and we are not going anywhere until we achieve our objective, to see an end of all COVID-19 mandates and with that a restoration of freedoms of all Canadians," he said.</p> <p>Trudeau on Monday said Canadians were disgusted by the behavior of some protesters and vowed not to be intimidated.</p> <p>The inaction of the police in Ottawa - some of whom have posed for selfies with demonstrators - contrasts with more robust action by authorities in the western province of Alberta.</p> <p>The Royal Canadian Mounted Police on Tuesday moved in on truckers blockading the U.S. border at the town of Coutts but pulled back after clashes with some drivers.</p> <p>As well as paralyzing Ottawa, the protests are also threatening the future of the official opposition Conservative Party, the Liberals' main rival.</p> <p>Party leader Erin O'Toole faces a confidence vote on Wednesday from legislators unhappy that he did not support the protests more enthusiastically at first. He is also under pressure for leading the party to defeat in last September's federal election.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Britain highest daily deaths in nearly a year
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-reports-534-covid-deaths-highest-nearly-year-2022-02-02/
GIST	<p>LONDON, Feb 2 (Reuters) - Britain reported 534 deaths within 28-days of a positive COVID-19 test on Wednesday, the highest daily figure since late February 2021.</p> <p>The government data also showed 88,085 new cases of COVID-19, in line with recent numbers.</p> <p>Whilst Wednesday's number of deaths was the highest in nearly a year, the total for the last seven days was down slightly on the previous seven-day period.</p>

HEADLINE	02/02 Trio of cities pay \$3M for fatal shooting
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/grays-harbor-area-police-agencies-pay-3-million-to-settle-lawsuit-by-family-of-man-killed-during-swat-like-assault/
GIST	<p>A trio of Grays Harbor County cities whose police departments formed a SWAT-like “critical response unit” will pay \$3 million to settle a lawsuit filed by the family of an emotionally disturbed Montesano man who was shot and killed apparently while trying to surrender to dozens of officers who had surrounded his home.</p> <p>Patrick Easton West, 43, was on the phone with a negotiator who had announced that West was calming down when a team of heavily armed officers, wearing camouflaged combat gear, forced their way into his house on April 16, 2019, according to police reports and evidence obtained by the family’s Seattle attorneys.</p> <p>One of the officers, armed with a handgun and carrying a bulletproof ballistic shield, fired seven shots at West, who was struck three times. He died the next day.</p> <p>West, who had no criminal history but suffered from mental health issues according to his family, had barricaded himself in a small manufacturing shop in the basement of his home. He did not have a firearm, but had been seen carrying a metal bar with tape on one end, which police later described as a “makeshift sword.”</p> <p>Officers said West was ordered to drop the bar and had thrown it out a door onto the lawn when the shots were fired, according to the lawsuit.</p> <p>After the shooting, police said the metal bar struck an officer, although there was no evidence anyone was injured, according to the lawsuit and police documents.</p> <p>Evidence also showed that statements made by officers — recorded by a nearby Washington State Patrol cruiser’s dash-camera audio — stating that West had exited his workshop at one point and struck a fence with the metal bar were later construed by Montesano police Chief Brett Vance to justify the callout of the Aberdeen Regional Critical Response Unit (ARCRU), concluding the incident amounted to assault on a police officer.</p> <p>During the entire incident, West’s wife and parents were nearby, said the family’s lawyer, Tim Ford, and begged law enforcement to leave West alone and let the situation calm down. They heard the shots and saw police pull a bleeding West from the workshop. The lawsuit states West was the father of a 9-year-old daughter.</p> <p>“Instead of focusing on de-escalation and responding appropriately to Pat’s symptoms, the defendants in charge of ARCRU steadily escalated their militarized response,” Ford wrote in the lawsuit, filed last year in U.S. District Court. “They seized Pat’s home and property, surrounding it with armed officers, positioning snipers on nearby rooftops and driving an armored vehicle into Pat’s front yard.”</p> <p>“And finally — despite hearing from their own negotiators that Pat was ‘coming down’ from his agitated state — they approached the house with a heavily armed team to breach the door to Pat’s basement workshop with a battering ram,” the lawsuit said.</p> <p>The lawsuit claims once officers were in the basement, they yelled conflicting commands, ordering West to drop the metal bar. When he threw it out the door, the lawsuit claims Hoquiam Officer David Peterson fired seven rounds with his pistol, striking West in the chest and back.</p> <p>Montesano Mayor Vini Samuel, in a statement issued through the city’s attorney in the matter, Thomas Nedderman, said that “Anytime a person dies and law enforcement is involved, it’s a tragedy.</p>

“Our condolences to the family and to the officers involved,” the mayor said. “We work hard to keep Montesano a safe place to live, and it has been almost 30 years since our community suffered any form of violent death absent suicide.

“Our goal is always to protect all members of the public by focusing on preventing such incidents and we will continue working toward that goal through training, accountability, transparency and community policing,” Samuel said.

The lawsuit alleges that while the ARCRU — which consists of officers from Aberdeen, Montesano and Hoquiam — “engages in paramilitary tactical operations, including deployment of officers in camouflage uniforms and tactical gear, special weaponry, snipers and an armored vehicle, it is not called a ‘SWAT’ team because it does not meet recognized ‘SWAT’ training or operational standards.”

Indeed, according to reports published by the city of Aberdeen, the lawsuit states, “the ARCRU rarely trains as an entire team, and the crisis negotiators train even less than the tactical officers. The ARCRU training ‘places an emphasis on shooting.’”

Court documents allege that when Chief Vance initially requested an ARCRU response, the commander of the unit declined, alleging the circumstances didn’t warrant a callout. The commander, identified in documents as Aberdeen police Officer Dale Green, offered to send a crisis negotiator instead.

“Shortly thereafter, Chief Vance requested ARCRU activation again, now reporting that Pat had hit his cedar fence with a steel billet while a Montesano officer was on the opposite side,” the lawsuit allege. While the officer wasn’t injured, Vance reportedly stated the incident amounted to assault on an officer “and we’re calling it a felony,” which allowed for the heavily armed unit to be activated and respond to the home, court documents state.

Over the next several hours, heavily armed officers, snipers and tactical teams surrounded West in the home, taking up positions on the property “without a warrant or exigent circumstances,” according to pleadings in the case. All the while, West’s family members repeatedly told officers that West was not a danger, did not have access to firearms and that officers’ actions were only serving to aggravate the circumstances, said Ford, the family’s attorney.

“He had a history of emotional and mental problems, but he had never harmed anyone and had never been arrested before,” Ford said. “His parents and wife told them to just leave him alone.” Ford said the family was assured that police had no intentions of using force or even taking firearms into the home.

Meantime, Montesano officers had gone to a Grays Harbor County District Court judge and used the incident involving the fence to obtain a warrant to “extricate” West from the home and take him into custody. Ford said the warrant was a “pretext” and that the judge did not have the authority to issue it without criminal charges, which had not been filed.

While this was taking place, the lawsuit alleged that West had talked several times to a crisis negotiator and his wife and by 6 p.m., just before the team breached the home and shot West, they both reported a change in West’s demeanor, noting that he was less agitated and “seemed to be ‘coming down.’”

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HEADLINE	02/02 Foreign fighters flocking to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3nqb5/ukraine-war-foreign-fighters
GIST	<p>From “war tourist” Americans to Russian-connected mercenaries, there are reports pointing to another round of foreign fighters flooding into the Ukraine conflict.</p> <p>As the eight-year conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalates, with hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers massing near the border, talk of foreign fighters entering a war that has already attracted thousands of them has once again become commonplace. Since the 2014 “little green men” invasion of</p>

[Crimea](#) and the conflict in Donbas (the war-torn region in the east of Ukraine), an estimated [17,000 foreign fighters from all over the world](#) have poured into the country, fighting on both sides.

In recent days, an American who was a vet of the French Foreign Legion was identified by journalist Nolan Peterson as having joined the [Georgian National Legion](#)—a volunteer battalion of soldiers that was once an official part of the Ukrainian military but has since been reactivated under the threat of Russian invasion. Several other European volunteers have apparently already joined the battalion, according to [Peterson's previous reporting](#). Led by former Georgian military officer Mamuka Mamulashvili, a veteran of the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 who went on to fight for Ukraine, the battalion has counted volunteers from all over the world into its ranks, including [Americans](#).

Mamulashvili told VICE News over a brief WhatsApp call that applications for the unit had increased and that he expected about a hundred more recruits from across Europe to show up to his battalion, stationed on the outskirts of Kyiv in the coming weeks.

At the dawn of the bloody 2014 Maidan revolution, which removed the sitting Ukrainian president that governed over a corrupt system under the sphere of Russia, [foreigners and ex-pats](#) streamed into the streets of Kyiv in support. Since then, many volunteer battalions, some with bonafide links to the political far-right, have attracted foreigners [from all over the world](#) and of various political stripes. Some of these fighters, too, have even been [documented volunteering with pro-Russian separatists](#) in Donetsk and fighting Ukrainian regulars. (The war in Ukraine has been compared to the war front not long ago in Syria and Iraq, which also [attracted war junkies](#) of many types.)

Additionally, [VICE News reported last week](#) how an American military lifestyle brand influencer set off a minor incident as state-backed Russian media used his visit to the front lines of Ukraine to suggest American mercenaries were training Ukrainian soldiers. Former U.S. soldier Derrick Bales told VICE News he was shooting a doc for his brand, not training anyone.

Multiple reports suggest Russia is recruiting a new round of mercenaries to send into Donbas, something the Ukrainian government [formally accused the Kremlin of doing](#). Then days ago, the Daily Beast published a scoop that Russia was [redeploying its soldiers in its battle hardened Wagner Group](#)—a Kremlin-linked firm of private soldiers—from the Central African Republic, to the war in Ukraine.

But the Ukrainian military, which has always been massively outmatched by the Russian forces that have sat at its doorstep in one form or another for years, has never openly recruited foreign soldiers or employed paid mercenaries into its cause.

The U.S. State Department did not immediately respond to VICE News on the issue of American foreign fighters traveling to Ukraine.

Kacper Rękawek, a postdoc fellow with the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo, has documented and data analyzed [the movement of foreign fighters in Ukraine](#) and says he isn't surprised the recent geopolitical brinkmanship has caught the eyes of foreigners.

"Yes, (there is) a spike in interest, sure," said Rękawek, who pointed out that "this is not 2014" and volunteer fighters can't as easily "just walk into their recruitment office in or around Maidan (Square)," which was common [during the early chaos of the revolution](#).

In recent years, the Ukrainian government has taken serious steps to screen fighters from abroad. But some have slipped through the cracks, such as ex-U.S. soldier Craig Lang, who [according to BuzzFeed News](#) is being investigated by the Department of Justice for war crimes in Donbas, and Marine-dropout and ex-member of an American terror group Ryan Burchfield ([who was very publicly deported on video](#) by Ukrainian intelligence agents in late 2020). The Kremlin has often latched onto these types of incidents as evidence [the Ukrainian government](#) is chock-full of Nazis, despite the country being led by a [Jewish president](#).

	<p>Rękawek explained that Kyiv passed legislation setting out exactly how a foreigner can legitimately enter the Ukrainian military to make it harder for extremists to join the conflict.</p> <p>“To be in territorial defence, you need to be a resident and signing a contract with the army takes time,” he said. “Of course, some (foreigners) will arrive... as trainers and will probably stay behind the front lines. I can see the Georgian National Legion becoming more active on this front.</p> <p>“I wouldn't, however, expect a tidal wave of such fighters. There's some space between 'on the way,' 'interested,' and being there.”</p> <p>Even so, it hasn't stopped one prominent Telegram channel associated with Atomwaffen Division—a neo-Nazi terror group that has seen several of its members arrested by the FBI—from urging its followers to join the Ukrainian war effort and gain battle experience for a future race war they hope for in America.</p> <p>“It's time to make sacrifices for National Socialism!” reads an audacious post to its followers, before urging them to join a volunteer battalion.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Omicron variant new versions; what's next?
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/the-omicron-variant-has-new-versions-already-what-comes-next/
GIST	<p>THE FAST-MOVING OMICRON variant is on the wane. More than half the states in the US appear to have passed a peak in cases, and global modeling predicts the wave will wash through most of the world by the end of March.</p> <p>That poses the question: What comes next? SARS-CoV-2 has already provided a near-term answer. A subvariant of Omicron called BA.2 is rapidly supplanting the first version, known as BA.1.</p> <p>In an assessment published last Friday, the United Kingdom's Health Security Agency said the incidence of BA.2 there doubled in seven days. A few days before that, the Statens Serum Institut, an arm of Denmark's health ministry, said BA.2 already accounts for almost half of that nation's Omicron cases.</p> <p>Similarly quick turnovers have been reported in most of the countries maintaining good data, according to a rapid review published on Twitter by the Pandemic Prevention Institute, a project of the Rockefeller Foundation. Its staff found the same pattern of replacement in India, Germany, and Japan and other Asian nations, as well as the UK. As of January 30, according to the data dashboard Outbreak.info, BA.2 had been found in 57 countries and 29 US states.</p> <p>From early findings, the BA.2 subvariant looks more transmissible than its already very infectious predecessor. There is not yet any clear signal that it causes more severe disease than BA.1 or improves on that variant's ability to escape the immune protection created by vaccines. Even without enhancements, though, it's possible that BA.2 could do some damage. The original version of Omicron, in circulation since November, caused less serious illness than its predecessor Delta yet crushed health care systems in the US because its intense infectiousness produced so many cases in unvaccinated people.</p> <p>In the US, 64 percent of the population is fully vaccinated and 26 percent have gotten boosters, which bolster immunity enough to improve defenses against the original Omicron. In the UK, the rates are 71 percent, with 55 percent boosted. But globally, only 52 percent of the world's population is fully vaccinated, and in some countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, rates of full vaccination are still in the single digits. So the longer-term answer to “What comes next?” is likely to be “more surprises,” as the coronavirus's restless evolution presses against the incomplete protections we have distributed patchily around the world.</p> <p>BA.2 isn't new, precisely. The South African researchers who flagged the emergence of the original Omicron identified BA.2 a week later based on differences in the mutations that made Omicron so distinct from Delta. (A nomenclature note: Scientists are generally calling BA.2 a “sublineage” or “subvariant”</p>

because the World Health Organization [has not classified](#) BA.2 as a stand-alone variant earning its own Greek letter. In that early work, the South African group also identified a BA.3.)

But while the original Omicron roared around the world right away, the second version took a while to rev up. That's puzzling to scientists, who are waiting for more data. "From a virology perspective, it's fascinating," says Nathan Grubaugh, a viral epidemiologist and associate professor at the Yale School of Public Health. "The differences in mutations between BA.1 and BA.2 are similar to the number of differences between Alpha and Delta. There's a lot of distance between them. So virologists and evolutionary biologists are asking: Where did this come from? How is it so divergent?"

Among the original Omicron's key differences from Delta, the variant that emerged in the summer of 2021, are a new ability to infect cells lining the upper airway—the nose and throat, instead of the lungs—along with some enhanced facility for escaping the antibody defenses created by vaccination or prior infection. In combination, those made Omicron much more transmissible. As Omicron BA.2 takes over, suggesting it's more transmissible still, the question becomes whether its divergence has allowed it to get better at cell entry and replication or at immune escape.

The answer could determine what the next phase of the pandemic looks like. "If BA.2 is able to escape immune responses better than BA.1—or if it's able to escape the immune responses that so many people globally just had to BA.1—then we're likely to see a resurgence in cases," Grubaugh says. "If BA.1 infection can protect against BA.2, then we're likely to see just a slower decline."

That switch in Omicron's preferred site of attack from deep in the lungs to high up in the airway—which made it easier for infected people to cough germs onto others—gave it a transmission advantage over Delta. It also may have reduced the occurrence of devastating illness that marked the earliest waves of the pandemic by keeping the virus from invading the lungs and other organs. Data published last week by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that, even though case numbers and hospitalizations soared during the Omicron wave, health care metrics that indicate severe illness—such as the number of days patients stayed in hospitals and whether they were admitted to an ICU—[actually decreased](#).

But whether Covid is now intrinsically a more mild disease or has been rendered that way by the blunting effect of immunity from vaccination or infection can't yet be determined. The emergence of Omicron BA.1 and BA.2 were detected by genomic studies, but it's too soon to have results from the kind of lab assays and population studies that will help untangle whether SARS-CoV-2 is becoming less virulent as it [settles into endemicity](#). Many virologists are skeptical. "I can't think of a virus in history that has evolved to mildness," says Rick Bright, a virologist and former director of the US Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority. "Evolution favors transmissibility."

Bright, who now leads the Rockefeller prevention initiative, argues the US has been missing opportunities to build tools that could detect the emergence of variants more quickly. Before Omicron arrived, the CDC switched away from studying most breakthrough infections, [choosing to analyze](#) only ones that sent people to the hospital or killed them. The Rockefeller team thinks the mild infections that the agency no longer prioritizes could hold crucial information. "That is the primordial soup, where the virus is evolving and mutating," Bright says.

"We have to invest in sequencing the mild cases, and when we do that, we're going to light up that battlefield where this virus is changing and evolving," he adds. "We can wait for these dangerous variants to smack us in the face, or we can look at the evolution under the surface of this virus and predict where the virus will go."

Some of the first indications that Omicron and then BA.2 emerged in the US came from [wastewater](#) sampling, which is an inexpensive and relatively low-tech [surveillance scheme](#) compared to testing patients and reporting their results to information systems governed by state authorities and federal privacy laws. The shock of the newest variants' arrival could be enough to drive adoption of additional data sources to flag them: passively collected mobility info, at-home rapid-test results, immunity surveys over zip codes or census tracts.

All the red flags in the world, though, won't stop new variants from arriving. SARS-CoV-2 can't be chased from the planet—it has found a home in [multiple animal species](#)—but we can deny it the chance to adapt to human immune systems. Protection could be conferred by prior infection, though this is not guaranteed: Omicron caused reinfections in people who had already contracted Delta and breakthrough infections in people who had taken the vaccines. And developing immunity through infection alone risks an unpredictable illness and recovery, or [long Covid](#), or the whole-body inflammatory attack in children known as [MIS-C](#).

The simpler answer is to distribute full courses of vaccines, including boosters, as widely as possible. “The best way to prevent more, more-dangerous, or more-transmissible variants from emerging is to stop unconstrained spread, and that requires many integrated public-health interventions, including, crucially, vaccine equity,” Aris Katzourakis, a professor of evolution and genomics at the University of Oxford, [wrote in Nature](#) last week.

Vaccine equity has consistently been where the world's pandemic response stumbles and stops. Researchers say—and have said so often that they now sound despairing—that pandemic control can never succeed until vaccine access improves. Worldwide, [more than 3 billion](#) people have received no vaccine at all.

“There is no reason at all why the next variant—which will happen, because of the billions of people in whom billions of virus particles are replicating right now—by sheer chance, could be way more sinister than Omicron,” says Madhukar Pai, the Canada research chair in epidemiology and global health at McGill University. “There is no reason at all, from everything we've seen with this virus, to hope that the next variant will not emerge, or that Omicron will be a mass immunizing event that will see us to the end of the pandemic.”

The interplay between vaccines and new variants is visible in a [preprint](#) that Grubaugh posted online last week, containing the results of a study by Yale and University of Nebraska researchers of 37,877 PCR-positive Covid tests performed as Omicron was moving into Connecticut. The research, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, [shows](#) that two vaccine doses created some defense against Delta, forcing the positive test rate down by almost half compared to people who were unvaccinated. Adding boosters reduced the positive rate by 83 percent. But among the people who became infected with Omicron, significant protection didn't kick in until after they received boosters—and even then, half of the participants still registered positive on their Covid tests.

The funny thing about that finding was that Grubaugh predicted it—last month, in a paper [in the journal Cell](#) written with Sarah Cobey, an associate professor at the University of Chicago. The authors envisioned that the next successful variant would leapfrog over its predecessors by combining increased transmissibility, the advantage Delta possessed, with greater facility for immune escape, the trick deployed by earlier variants. The catch: They thought a newer, more nimble variant would emerge *from* Delta—and not, as Omicron did, from a distant branch of the virus's evolutionary tree.

Grubaugh acknowledges that this constitutes a lesson about the need to think through all the possibilities. “We lacked the imagination to see that there's some unknown reservoir floating around, in which this virus evolved in such a divergent way,” he says. It's a useful reminder that as Omicron 1 and 2 and 3 gnaw at the outer edges of how transmissible a virus can become, SARS-CoV-2 can still retain the capacity to surprise.

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HEADLINE	02/02 New emergency responders: librarians
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/environment/2022/02/new-emergency-responders-librarians
GIST	When the Seattle Public Library system closed the downtown Central Library and 26 branches during heavy snow and cold at the end of 2021, it wasn't the first time it shut these public facilities because conditions were unsafe for employees and patrons.

But this time, the reaction was different. While library staff members say the decision helped prevent them from risking their safety, library users were devastated to lose one of their only dependable places of refuge during the pandemic.

In Seattle and beyond, libraries and librarians are [increasingly playing a part in emergency response to climate-related events](#) and inclement weather — such as extreme heat and cold, wildfire smoke and snowstorms.

Libraries are often some of the only community facilities that are free to use without membership, and in Seattle they have historically provided refuge to nearby older, lower-income and unhoused patrons who otherwise do not have access to climate-safe buildings.

“We are de facto day shelters for many of the city’s unhoused population,” said one library employee, who asked that their name not be used because they fear retaliation.

“Libraries are not generally designed with the intention to be shelters — but where libraries have an appropriate facility and there is a community need, we know library leaders are often asked to help,” said Melanie Huggins, president of the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association.

Seeing libraries as a multipurpose community resource is something some staff members embrace, but others feel this latest trend may have gone a step too far.

“Libraries are seen as places that can and should do all, to the detriment of their primary purpose: to provide access to information,” said Kelly Jensen, a writer and former librarian who recently published an essay in Book Riot titled “[Public Libraries Aren’t Essential Services](#),” which touched on the recent Seattle winter storm. Jensen said after budget cuts for city departments in the 2008 recession, libraries fought to prove they were worth funding, and believes they wound up with responsibilities once reserved for other departments. “We’re seeing that now with COVID, but it’s even more amplified,” Jensen said.

While some local library employees feel they have the resources to assist patrons in inclement weather, many do not. Not only are library staff members distressed by changing and sometimes ambiguous expectations, but they are concerned about whether American libraries are even physically set up to sufficiently serve as refuges during inclement weather, especially during a pandemic.

“I think because of the nature of our work we’re always going to be in some ways on the front lines of these issues,” said a Seattle Public Library employee, who asked her name not be used because she fears retaliation. “People can just come and be. I think that’s an important role we play. But at the same time, we shouldn’t be a substitute for other social services.

“COVID has become our new reality over the last two years. Serving the homeless has been our reality. Now it seems like inclement weather will be another conversation to have about how the library fits in.”

Experiencing inclement weather

Librarians share information and coordinate education around climate change all the time. But many Seattle-area public library employees say they didn’t expect to be on the front lines of the climate crisis in a work capacity, as extreme heat, cold and wildfire smoke increasingly affect their work lives on top of new COVID-19 responsibilities, like mask distribution.

Huggins of the ALA said it’s vital that libraries not only have the resources to [build and maintain climate-resilient facilities](#), but also be included in emergency response planning that keeps users and workers safe and prevents damage to library resources. “Extreme weather from climate change can exacerbate problems that some libraries have faced, like leaky roofs, flooding and inadequate HVAC. ALA is calling for federal funding to improve library buildings to better meet these and other challenges,” Huggins said.

For employees in air-conditioned buildings, one SPL employee said, heat and smoke events aren't usually huge work disruptions — and can even be appreciated by employees without air-conditioning at home. But facilities without air-conditioning can become unbearable in the heat. Nine facilities in the SPL system do not have air-conditioning, but about 70% do.

During the record-setting heat wave in June, even air-conditioned branches were overwhelmed. Air-conditioning failed at two branches that were supposed to be open, forcing closures, staff say. They were faced with mediating conflicts between patrons in non-socially distanced settings, monitoring the air-conditioning and finding ways to squeeze more seating into a space not designed to be an event space. All of that came on top of the staff's regular library work.

In buildings without air-conditioning, the library system has a hot weather protocol that kicks in when indoor temperatures get too dangerous for library patrons and employees. SPL spokeswoman Laura Gentry said that if buildings see 80-degree temperatures for sustained periods, the system closes buildings and redeploys staff — and, it's hoped, patrons — to buildings with air-conditioning.

During the smoke events of 2020, staff were still providing only curbside service to protect unvaccinated patrons from each other. But standing outside to collect or distribute books felt unsafe, some staff say. Gentry said 100% of library facilities have air filtration systems that allow them to safely remain open where heat and the community spread of COVID-19 allow.

The libraries are not designated as guaranteed cooling or warming centers. But the library is a city department, and the [Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan](#) requires city departments to “maintain a basic level of preparedness and response capabilities” and “conduct, or participate in, training and exercises to develop and maintain capability to respond and recover from an incident.”

However, Kate Hutton with the Office of Emergency Management said, “SPL is not an executive department, so their relationship to citywide emergency planning and response is slightly different to most city departments.”

Traditionally, Gentry said, the library system shares which branches it will be able to open, and the city then communicates that information to the public. “At the end of the day, because we're not an executive department, it's really more of a partnership and a supporting role,” Gentry said.

In making decisions about whether to close branches, library leadership considers whether there is enough staff available to work, and whether nearby road conditions make getting to the library dangerous (or even impossible, if bus lines stop running). Branches that are closest to public transit and vulnerable communities are more likely to open first, Gentry said.

“We need to feel confident that our staff can make it to work and make it back home safely,” Gentry said. “The only time I can think of that we ‘opened’ on days we were supposed to be closed was to provide restroom access early on in the pandemic, and we provided that for several months.”

But regardless of how libraries are activated, “the library is going to be used whether [library employees] like it or not,” said Michael Mabe, director of library services in Chesterfield County, Virginia, who [researches, writes and gives presentations about the roles of librarians during emergencies](#).

Libraries and emergency response

Library employees in some other cities are actively taking on basic emergency responsibilities in inclement weather, and they report that this is working well for them, with good expectations and physical and financial support.

Mabe advocated for his library system in Virginia to be included in Chesterfield County's emergency service response a little over a decade ago after particularly bad storms showed how libraries can fill voids. The library system has an official leadership role within a county emergency response that

distributes shelter, food and mass care, and provides heating and cooling stations during the day and even at night when necessary. (SPL is [a listed support agency](#) for the [same response function](#) in Seattle.)

Mabe worked with emergency services staff to provide annual emergency training to library employees in management positions at low or no cost to the library. This training, known as Community Emergency Response Team training, includes first aid and also focuses on how to help people who come to the library seeking assistance as survivors of an event. Librarians learn how to provide initial emotional support and assess people for trauma and minor injuries. “We don’t expect [library staff] to go out and save the day or rescue people from death-defying circumstances, Mabe said.

Carol Nelson, director of planning and communications with Vancouver Public Library in British Columbia, said the Vancouver system has started briefing frontline staff on how to identify signs of climate-related health issues. “Identifying heat stress in patrons, for example, is something that is new for us, but could make a difference in a medical emergency. It is about knowing when to offer some water and when to call for paramedics,” Nelson said.

Mabe said that to be effective in “first responder-esque” roles, libraries need “absolutely constant support” from emergency management. Critically, his librarians may volunteer to be trained; people with equivalent emergency training are assigned to offer libraries support; and library staff report additional needs beyond their purview to social services or emergency medical technicians.

Funding and resource concerns

Library staffers in Seattle broadly express concerns about their job responsibilities expanding with the climate crisis (in addition to homelessness and COVID) without funding or resources to support this additional work

“I worry that social services needs will continue to be ignored in favor of using an already existing institution,” one SPL employee said, citing budget cuts elsewhere. “We are also expected to be social services workers, mental health professionals and more, and we are trained and paid for none of that.”

Better integration with emergency response is something that Mabe said has served his mid-sized library system well. Initially, he heard staff say that these responsibilities weren’t their job, and worried they wouldn’t participate. “But we really haven’t had any library staff not wanting to participate,” he said.

At this point, Gentry said, SPL has not considered emergency responder training or inclement weather response training for staff since “it would be outside of the scope of work for the majority of unionized positions at the library.” However, a “small number” of library staff were identified to receive incident management training to coordinate with the City’s Emergency Operation Center. She said the library’s director of public services has not heard requests from staff for community emergency response training, but staff members do make recommendations about how to improve operations after inclement weather.

The Office of Emergency Management’s Hutton said her office provides resources and training, but does not “direct other departments’ activities, like emergency planning or training programs.”

SPL added staff to reflect the sometimes fluid responsibilities of libraries to their communities, like the currently vacant community resource specialist position, which provided social services referrals to the Downtown Emergency Service Center, and a new safety manager role. Gentry said she thinks the person in this role will be important in connecting the library with information about climate preparedness. “But right now, her focus is largely on COVID,” she said.

“If the city wants the library to be part of an emergency plan, then they need to work with library administration and our union to figure out what is feasible, and it needs to be figured out and put into place long before we have inclement weather,” one SPL staff member said. “And staff should be compensated properly for the role they’re expected to play, whatever that may be.”

Library employees say it's important to them to see more regular communication with emergency and social services employees, while recognizing all of their fields are under a lot of stress.

Gentry said she's heard suggestions to allow city volunteer workers access to library facilities when there's a need for emergency response, but the library is reluctant to use nonlibrary staff, as they might be unfamiliar with a building's safety, security and emergency response procedures.

Creating climate-safe libraries

Libraries and their supporters around the country have been advocating for the proposed federal [Build America's Libraries Act](#), which would pay for upgrades that prepare libraries for natural disasters and environmental hazards, while making internet and other resources more accessible for patrons.

Funding — for both buildings and employees — can show a community's priorities.

"There's a good argument for suggesting to the community that if they do look at [libraries as climate refuges], they ought to invest in strong infrastructure," Mabe said.

ALA's Huggins said there's no specific national data about libraries' ability to provide weather refuge. But overall, the ALA estimates U.S. libraries need \$32 billion in upgrades, "including \$260 million in rural Washington."

SPL covered weather concerns in [its \\$102.8 million budget for 2022](#), Gentry believes. "We're seeing more people that need to escape the hot weather and the wildfire smoke that comes through in the summer," Gentry said. "We had librarians walking outside just to hand people cups of water."

[The city of Seattle budgeted](#) \$1.7 million to add air-conditioning to the northeast and southwest branches, Gentry said; once those two facilities are updated, 80% of library buildings will have air-conditioning.

The libraries that don't have air-conditioning, Gentry said, are mostly Carnegie-era facilities, which generally are more costly and challenging to equip with cooling systems because of their landmark status. But Gentry said seismic retrofit work at facilities creates opportunities to install more air-conditioning.

The Green Lake branch is starting seismic retrofits this year; SPL is looking at doing the same at the Columbia and University branches in coming years, as they have received [2019 library levy](#) money for retrofits.

Once air-conditioning is installed at these branches, the remaining Carnegie buildings without cooling systems are the Fremont, Queen Anne and West Seattle branches.

At the same time, some library staff feel that updates to the library aren't enough to support Seattleites in inclement weather. "We need actual daytime cooling and warming shelters during adverse weather," one SPL employee said. "There's definitely a place for the library in there, but it shouldn't all be on us."

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HEADLINE	02/02 Eurozone inflation rises to fresh record
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/eurozone-inflation-rises-to-fresh-record-against-expectations-11643799121?mod=hp_major_pos1#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>The eurozone's inflation rate rose to a fresh record high in January, an unwelcome surprise for policy makers at the European Central Bank who have said they don't expect to raise their key interest rate this year.</p> <p>As in the U.S., consumer-price inflation in the eurozone rose much more sharply in 2021 than policy makers had expected. The eurozone's annual rate of consumer-price inflation ended 2021 at 5%, then the highest on record and more than twice the ECB's target.</p>

However, ECB officials and most economists were confident that the first inflation reading of the year would show a significant drop as earlier changes in Germany's sales tax dropped out of annual comparisons.

Instead, figures released by the European Union's statistics agency on Wednesday showed the annual rate of inflation picked up to 5.1% on a fresh surge in energy prices. Economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal last week had expected to see a decline to 4.3%.

The ECB will announce its latest policy decisions Thursday, although little is expected to change ahead of its March meeting, when policy makers will discuss the implications of new forecasts for inflation and growth.

At its last meeting in December, the central bank raised its inflation forecast for this year, but said it expected the rise in consumer prices to slow as 2022 advances. It expected inflation to fall back below its target in 2023, and said that under those circumstances it was unlikely to raise its key interest rate this year.

By contrast, the Federal Reserve has indicated [it is likely to raise interest rates](#) a number of times this year, likely starting in March.

But with every inflation reading that is higher than anticipated, the ECB's stance becomes more challenging to explain to households and businesses.

Investors are starting to have doubts about the ECB's guidance, and began to sell eurozone government bonds when national inflation figures from Spain and Germany first hinted at the January inflation surprise on Monday. The 10-year German bund yield closed in positive territory for the first time since May 2019, maintaining this on Tuesday as well. According to analysts, bond prices now suggest that investors expect a small rise in the ECB's key rate this year.

"The market is also clearly in the mood for challenging the prevailing ECB narrative," wrote HSBC economist Fabio Balboni in a note to clients.

While the pickup in inflation during January was relatively modest, it counts as a major surprise. That is because economists had long expected to see a big step down in inflation during January as a result of what are known as "base effects" connected to changes in Germany's sales taxes.

In July 2020, the government of the eurozone's largest member cut its value-added tax rates for six months. That meant consumer prices from July 2021 onward were being compared with artificially low prices from a year earlier, exaggerating measured inflation. January was the first month in which that base effect was absent from the inflation figures, since the tax rates reverted back to their pre-pandemic levels at the start of 2021.

The removal of that distorting factor was apparent in the January eurozone inflation figures, with the annual rate of inflation for prices of manufactured goods slowing to 2.3% from 2.9% in December. However, that was offset by resurgent energy prices, which rose 28.6% in the 12 months through January, compared with 25.9% in the 12 months through December.

Frederik Ducrozet, an economist and noted ECB watcher at Pictet Wealth Management, tweeted that it was the "largest upside surprise in the history of euro area flash...inflation releases."

In common with other central bankers, ECB policy makers are reluctant to raise their key interest rate in response to interruptions in supply that they can do little to affect. However, they do worry that the longer inflation remains above their target, the greater the risk that households and businesses will grow accustomed to prices rising more quickly than its target rate, opening the way for a self-reinforcing series of higher pay deals and price rises by employers to cover their increased costs.

“Usually they say they don’t react to temporary price shocks, but this time the main concern is second-round effects,” said Anna Titareva, an economist at UBS. “Their concern is that the longer inflation remains high, the greater the risk that could feed into more permanent increases in inflation expectations.”

As prices surge, eurozone workers are facing a sharp fall in their real spending power, while their bargaining power appears to be growing. According to the ECB, wages in the three months through September were just 3% higher than a year earlier, lagging behind inflation. Figures released by Eurostat on Tuesday showed the eurozone’s unemployment rate fell to 7% in December, the lowest level recorded since the series began in 1998.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Fraudulent Covid test sites trigger warnings
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/fraudulent-covid-19-test-sites-proliferate-triggering-consumer-warnings-11643810401?mod=hp_lead_pos7
GIST	<p>Officials nationwide are trying to stay ahead of a proliferation of Covid-19 test sites that they say are offering fraudulent services to the public.</p> <p>Attorneys general in states including New Mexico, Oregon, Florida, Minnesota, New York and Illinois have shut down pop-up test locations, or issued warnings, citing late or false test results and theft of people’s personal information. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has warned that “scammers are preying on people looking for Covid tests.”</p> <p>Authorities have alleged that the operators of these sites are making money by sending bills to people whose insurance is supposed to cover Covid-19 tests or falsely claiming consumers are uninsured as a way to seek reimbursement from the federal government.</p> <p>Though access has been increasing, pharmacies, health systems and government agencies have since December felt the strain of demand for Covid-19 tests in the midst of the Omicron surge. That has created an opening for independent providers, some of which are fly-by-night operations, according to law-enforcement officials.</p> <p>Public-health authorities often tightly regulate labs that analyze Covid-19 tests, but don’t closely monitor sites that conduct the tests, creating regulatory gaps.</p> <p>“You want to make testing available,” said Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. “At the same time, when you don’t have as many barriers, you open up the potential for fraud.”</p> <p>James Jackson, a retired geologist in Portland, Ore., said Covid-19 tests were in short supply near his home in November, so he went to a pop-up testing booth in the parking lot of a convenience store. Mr. Jackson, 73 years old, wanted to make sure he wasn’t carrying the virus before visiting an immunocompromised friend.</p> <p>After presenting his insurance information, he took a PCR test and was told to expect results by email in three days. When that didn’t happen, Mr. Jackson said he returned to the site and was assured results were coming soon.</p> <p>“I never did hear from them,” Mr. Jackson said, adding that the pop-up site is now closed. “I thought, ‘God, this looks like fraud.’”</p> <p>In Philadelphia, workers at a pop-up tent advertised free Covid-19 testing in late December. When approached by city staff, they falsely claimed to be funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said James Garrow, spokesman for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health.</p>

That site closed voluntarily, but others have sprouted, many of which “are little more than a table set up on the sidewalk,” Mr. Garrow said.

“We’ve told members of the public to contact our call center when they come across them, but we are likely missing some,” he said.

Philadelphia is looking at new regulations for test sites, Mr. Garrow added.

In Los Angeles, County Supervisor Janice Hahn last month asked officials to monitor pop-up testing spots, with her office saying in a statement that “some sites are charging people for tests they never receive results for and others are asking people to give them their Social Security number.” Officials had already shut down six fraudulent sites there, her office said.

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison filed on Jan. 19 a lawsuit against Center for Covid Control LLC and an associated independent lab, alleging that they “failed to deliver test results, or delivered test results that were falsified or inaccurate.” The lab allegedly billed the federal government more than \$113 million for testing purportedly uninsured patients across the country.

Former employees told investigators they were “instructed to lie to consumers about their tests being inconclusive or negative when, in fact, the sample had not been tested,” Mr. Ellison’s office said in a statement.

The Center for Covid Control says on its website that it runs some 300 testing sites nationwide and that it is currently pausing operations to train additional staff on procedures and compliance with regulatory guidelines. The website says the company “remains committed to providing the highest level of customer service and diagnostic quality.” A person answering a phone at a number linked to the owner declined to answer questions about the lawsuit.

In Lufkin, Texas, residents became suspicious after a testing table popped up in an old Kmart parking lot and an organizer “couldn’t give a clear, straight answer” about who the site was affiliated with, said city spokeswoman Jessica Pebsworth.

The site was gone as quickly as it came, and officials told the public to be cautious about such operations in the future.

“They get uncomfortable,” she said of the fast-disappearing sites, “and just pull up their stakes and head to the next town, I imagine.”

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HEADLINE	02/02 China fortifies borders; Southern Great Wall
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-fortifies-its-borders-with-a-southern-great-wall-citing-covid-19-11643814716?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>An extensive buildup of barriers along China’s 3,000-mile southern border is under way, according to public documents, official statements and interviews with residents, ostensibly to battle Covid-19 but with likely long-lasting ramifications on trade and travel.</p> <p>The small Chinese city of Ruili, in the far south next to Myanmar, has seen a major construction project in the past two years. It is a border fence equipped with barbed wire, surveillance cameras and sensors.</p> <p>Farther east, along China’s border with Vietnam, a 12-foot-high fence went up abruptly last year. It stops Vietnamese locals from heading to Chinese villages to harvest corn or sell medicinal herbs, and it looks like a prison, said Sung A Ho, a hotelier in Vietnam’s mountainous Lao Cai province.</p>

The avowed purpose is to fight the spread of Covid-19 by limiting the entry of traders, workers and smugglers. The Southern Great Wall, people on social media are calling it. State media outlets have dubbed it the Anti-Covid Great Wall.

While some [other countries try to transition toward living with Covid-19](#), China determinedly maintains a [zero-Covid strategy](#), especially with the Beijing Winter Olympics starting this week. It does so not only through lockdowns and mass testing but also, increasingly, by walling off its neighbors.

The strategy means that along China's long southern border, life is changing in ways likely to last long beyond the pandemic, with trade getting cumbersome and with control of people's movements tightened.

The efforts are part of a wider drive by China to secure its borders, facilitate infrastructure projects and prevent refugees from crossing into China, said Karin Dean of Tallinn University in Estonia, who studies the border dynamics between China and Myanmar.

China's calls to guard against a Covid-19 spread via the border are emphatic. In an August letter to villagers in border areas of Yunnan province, Chinese leader Xi Jinping urged locals to "safeguard the sacred land." He told officials and civilians to unite to build an unbreachable barrier.

In Guangxi, a region bordering Vietnam, party officials urged cadres to "race against time, go all out, resolutely win the battle against the pandemic and defend the 'south gate' " of China. The Communist Party chief of Yunnan province called for a mind-set of "facing death unflinchingly" to reassure the party leadership and Mr. Xi.

Yunnan, which borders Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, earmarked a half-billion-dollar fund last year to fortify security barriers at the border. The province's governor said in January that 100,000 officials, police officers, soldiers and civilians have been patrolling the border.

A Journal review of public records shows that in the past two years, China has built or strengthened at least 285 miles of fencing along its borders, most of it in the south. The actual figures are likely higher because not all local governments disclose this type of spending. At a wire-making center in Hebei province, some manufacturers bill their products as "border Covid-prevention wire."

In the Vietnamese coastal province of Quang Ninh, home to small farming communities belonging to the Dao ethnic group, a sturdy fence with pillars, sharp-edged metal grills and coiled barbed wire runs across hilltops along the Chinese border as far as the eye can see. Cameras and lights appear at intervals atop the recently built blue-painted structure, with a narrow paved path on the Chinese side.

The lights come on at night, said 31-year-old Duong On, a Vietnamese farmer who lives in a settlement at the base of the hill. People from the Vietnam side can no longer venture across to cut trees, Mr. Duong said, and Chinese farmers are no longer seen grazing their water buffaloes on the Vietnam side.

On a visit to villages along that stretch, long fences were visible at different points. Some appeared rudimentary—a few layers of stacked barbed wire—while others were more elaborate, like the one near Mr. Duong's home. Residents said Chinese authorities are continuing to build fences every day.

Phun Thi Ha, 65, used to cross into China to source star anise spices from the fruit of evergreen trees and cut grass for making brooms. A fence now blocks her path. A few miles from a trail, where locals say cross-border travel was once common for work or to smuggle chicken feet, pork intestines and other frozen food, a fence now snakes along the border.

"The fence came up as a Covid-19 barrier and also so that goods can't cross," said Doong A Tai, a resident.

China put barriers on some parts of its borders long before Covid-19, not only near North Korea in the northeast and Xinjiang in the far west, but also in the south, where smuggling is a headache. But the extent

to which the country has expanded fortifications all along the southern border during the pandemic has gone largely unnoticed outside the region.

In some spots, it includes the kind of surveillance common in China's big cities. Xiaoguangnong, a tiny village of only 260 people close to Myanmar, has a facial-recognition system to distinguish locals from outsiders, according to state media.

Besides the southern border, several northern Chinese regions adjoining Mongolia and Russia have been fortifying border fences over the past two years, public records show. The efforts there often focus on strengthening existing fences rather than building new ones.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in response to questions that fortifying borders is a widely accepted international practice, and that the fencing is helping to prevent cross-border transmission of Covid-19.

Vietnam's government didn't respond to requests for comment, nor did that of Myanmar.

The southern Chinese city of Ruili, a jewelry-trading hub, has taken a heavy hit in China's fight against Covid-19. The local party secretary was stripped of his duties last April for failure to keep the disease suppressed.

Ruili officials said in October that just since July, 716 people who entered from neighboring Myanmar, both Chinese and non-Chinese, had tested positive for Covid-19. The city has imposed lockdown after lockdown, lifting the most recent one late last year. In the first nine months of 2021, Ruili's economy contracted 8.4% from a year earlier. Many residents have left.

Ruili has spent much of the past two years building a strong border fence and a buffer zone. An elaborate system now allows cross-border trade to take place with little or no human contact, according to local people and to state media reports.

Trucks from Myanmar must stop at the Chinese border. Their cargoes have to be sanitized and remain on the Myanmar side for 48 hours. Then, robots and cranes move the cargo onto Chinese trucks. Chinese drivers take the goods across the border, where they are sanitized again and held for 24 more hours before they can be cleared for distribution inside China.

"At least now we can restart our business," said Chen Yunzhong, a 56-year-old businessman who imports fruits to China from Myanmar. "There was a period of time that I thought I had to do something else to make a living."

Ruili's government has put thousands of police and ordinary citizens on duty to watch the border 24 hours a day, according to local official media.

A farmer in his 30s said he was among those placed on night duty to watch for illegal crossings—work that isn't paid. He said he hasn't been able to sell his garden trees and other products because so many people have left the city. The farmer said he received Covid-19 subsidies totaling \$470 last year, but without a steady income, he has taken to digging up taro root and boiling it with vegetables in order to eat.

For China, keeping trade flowing at border points is crucial, both to ensure livelihoods and to bring in needed materials. A railway linking Kunming in Yunnan province to Vientiane, Laos—a project of China's Belt and Road trade initiative—carries cargo but won't take passengers across the border until after the pandemic, according to state media.

The new barriers and other controls appear likely to forever change the relationships among many communities along the border. Ruili's restrictions cut off formerly easy crossings from the Myanmar city of Muse, said Sai Khin Maung, an executive of a trade-focused chamber of commerce in Muse.

	<p>Because all trade in watermelons, mangoes, corn and other produce must now flow through official border gates, taking much longer, the produce often rots, Mr. Maung said. “We cannot express the impact on us,” he said.</p> <p>China has been trying to control its border with Myanmar for years to curb activities like smuggling and drug trafficking, said David Brenner, a University of Sussex lecturer and author of a book on Myanmar’s borderlands.</p> <p>“Covid-19 might be the official justification that China is giving for building the buffer zone now,” he said. “But that intention started long before and will govern things long after the pandemic ends.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Olympics organizers downplay Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/feb/02/organisers-downplay-fears-with-11-at-winter-olympics-in-hospital-with-covid
GIST	<p>Eleven people at the Winter Olympics are in hospital with Covid, Beijing 2022 officials have revealed, although none are in a life-threatening condition.</p> <p>Organisers have also downplayed concerns that the virus is spreading within the ‘closed-looped’ system in Beijing, which completely separates Olympic personnel from the general public, despite a further nine athletes and 23 team officials testing positive in the last 24 hours.</p> <p>The overall number of cases now stands at 232 since 23 January, leading to fears that some top athletes will miss out when the Games officially begin on Friday. However, Dr Brian McCloskey, chair of the medical expert panel for Beijing 2022, struck an upbeat note in front of the world’s media.</p> <p>“The vast majority of people who have tested positive are well, a lot of them are asymptomatic,” said McCloskey. “There have been 11 people hospitalised, because they had a symptom but none of those are seriously ill in any way.”</p> <p>Everyone travelling to Beijing, including athletes, coaches, team personnel and the media had to test negative twice before travelling, then again upon arrival at the airport. They also have to have daily PCR tests.</p> <p>McCloskey said there were no signs of a spread within the closed loop, adding: “It’s early days to look at all the gene sequencing, but at present that’s not a problem we’re particularly worried about.”</p> <p>“If we found evidence there was sustained community transmission, then we will activate our response plan, which then means more testing, tracing, isolating and a more aggressive approach to contact tracing.</p> <p>“But we are nowhere near that level at present. But it is not about the numbers, it’s about the extent to which there might be spread within the closed loop.”</p> <p>On Wednesday Sweden and Norway both confirmed they had two new cases each. So far none of Team GB’s 109 athletes, coaches and team officials here in Beijing have caught the virus.</p> <p>The biggest name to test positive so far has been the American bobsledder Elana Meyers Taylor, who has won medals in the past three Olympics. On Tuesday she confirmed she was in an isolation hotel in Beijing but said: “I feel great, I feel like I could go out and train. That’s the most frustrating thing.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Army discharges soldiers refuse vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/02/us-army-covid-vaccine-discharge-soldiers

GIST	<p>US soldiers who refuse to get a Covid-19 vaccine will be immediately discharged, the US army said on Wednesday, saying the move was critical to maintain combat readiness.</p> <p>The air force gave its forces until 2 November to get the vaccine.</p> <p>The army's order applies to regular army soldiers, active-duty army reservists and cadets unless they have approved or pending exemptions, it said in a statement.</p> <p>The discharge order is the latest from a US military branch removing unvaccinated service members amid the pandemic after the Pentagon made the vaccine mandatory for all service members in August 2021.</p> <p>The vast majority of all active-duty troops have received at least one dose. Roughly 79 uniformed military personnel across the different services have died from the novel coronavirus.</p> <p>"Army readiness depends on soldiers who are prepared to train, deploy, fight and win our nation's wars," the army secretary, Christine Wormuth, said. "Unvaccinated soldiers present risk to the force and jeopardize readiness."</p> <p>Other branches of the US military, including the US air force, have already begun to remove those who have chosen not to receive a Covid vaccine, which were first authorized for emergency use in December 2020.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 India health workers claim vax status fraud
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/02/indian-health-workers-allege-widespread-vaccine-certificate
GIST	<p>Health workers on the frontline of India's Covid vaccination programme say people are being officially registered as double vaccinated without receiving both doses because of pressure to meet government targets.</p> <p>Workers described how easy it was to falsely register second vaccine doses for people who did not attend appointments, by using personal records from their first dose and opting to bypass a code sent to their mobile phone.</p> <p>"There is no technical glitch," said Aditya, a health worker from Uttar Pradesh who requested that only his first name was used owing to fear of reprisal. "The issue is the unprecedented pressure on us to increase the number of vaccinated people."</p> <p>The vaccine status of all citizens is recorded on a government-built platform called CoWIN. CoWIN vaccination certificates are globally recognised and make people eligible for inter-state and international travel, including to countries that are accepting only fully vaccinated passengers.</p> <p>The government had set a deadline of the end of 2021 to get everyone in India vaccinated, which was missed. According to official statistics, 75% of the adult population have now had two doses. Last week, the prime minister, Narendra Modi, tweeted that he was "proud of all those who are making our vaccination drive a success".</p> <p>However, health workers who spoke to the Guardian alleged the figures were being manipulated, and estimated that in urban areas 20% to 35% of people had been fraudulently registered as double vaccinated. In rural areas they estimated that the figure could be as high as 40% to 60%.</p> <p>'Shocking'</p> <p>Manish Kumar, a 21-year-old student from Patna, Bihar, described how he had been on the way to a vaccination centre in June last year when his sister, Puja Kumari, 28, received a text message on her phone saying she had successfully received her first vaccine.</p>

When the siblings reached the centre about an hour later they raised the problem with officials and threatened legal action. “After that, they vaccinated all of us, including my sister, saying there was a technical glitch and apologised,” said Kumar.

But the same then happened to Kumar’s father, Mukesh Prasad, a farmer, who was en route to the vaccination centre when he got a text saying his second vaccine had been administered.

Another problem emerged when it came to Kumar’s second dose. In October, after he had moved 170 miles away to attend Banaras Hindu University in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, he received a message saying he had just received his second dose at a health facility in Patna. “I want some sort of protection from Covid-19, but how will my father and I get the second vaccine done?” asked Kumar.

Kaprela Hari, a 32-year-old IT professional from Rajampet in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, faced a similar problem for his father, a farmer, who had been too busy in the fields to make time for his second appointment. Out of the blue, he received a text message confirming his father’s receipt of a second vaccine dose and a link to the CoWIN certificate of double vaccination status.

“The nearby facility for vaccination would open at 11am and close at 1pm, and it had not been possible for me to get my father vaccinated in this two-hour gap,” said Hari. “So I was surprised when I got the vaccination message.”

After taking up the issue with a health worker posted in his locality, Hari said he was told that the local facility was not responsible and that his father “should have turned up for vaccination on time”.

Hari concluded that data was being “manipulated”.

Deceased people also appear to be receiving vaccine certificates in an apparent attempt to boost numbers.

In January, Uday Bir Singh was having lunch with relatives in a restaurant when he received a text: “Dear Manju Rani, you have successfully been vaccinated with your second dose.” A click on the link attached to the message revealed the vaccine certificate of his wife, Rani, who had died of Covid eight months earlier.

“It felt like a cruel joke,” said Akanksha, Singh’s daughter. “How can my mother be vaccinated in January 2022 when she died in May 2021? We felt devastated and didn’t understand how it happened.”

In a statement, the government denied any vaccine fraud was taking place, stating that every vaccine team had a “verifier” whose sole job it was to confirm the identities of those being vaccinated.

“[The] CoWIN system is an inclusive platform and has been designed keeping the limitations and challenges of mobile and internet availability across the country,” the government said. “Necessary features and flexibility, to ensure that every eligible individual has the access to vaccination, regardless of any of physical, digital or socioeconomic barriers to access, have been incorporated in CoWIN.

“At the same time, SOPs [standard operating procedures] and features have been incorporated to prevent fraudulent and/or wrong data entry at time of vaccination.”

India’s healthcare system is woefully underfunded and underresourced, and the vaccination programme has put more pressure on frontline healthcare workers, who work long hours on little pay. Several workers said the practice of falsely registering people as fully vaccinated was a result of threats from senior officials to suspend workers or withhold salaries if vaccination targets were not met.

“I was slapped in a meeting by a district level official who was not happy with the number of vaccinations we have been doing,” said a 45-year-old health worker in Bihar. “Later, the official called me and apologised, saying that there is tremendous pressure from the minister of the state.”

	Wahida, a healthcare worker from Jammu and Kashmir, said: “The easy way to get away with the situation is to register people, no matter what. It is less hectic and officials are also happy.”
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HEADLINE	02/02 Study: exposure 1 nasal droplet enough
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/02/exposure-to-one-nasal-droplet-enough-for-covid-infection-study
GIST	<p>Exposure to a single nasal droplet is sufficient to become infected with Covid-19, according to a landmark trial in which healthy volunteers were intentionally given a dose of the virus.</p> <p>The trial, the first to have monitored people during the entire course of infection, also found that people typically develop symptoms very quickly – on average, within two days of encountering the virus – and are most infectious five days into the infection.</p> <p>The study was carried out using a strain of the virus before the emergence of the Alpha, Delta and Omicron variants.</p> <p>The trial’s chief investigator, Prof Christopher Chiu, of Imperial College London, said: “Our study reveals some very interesting clinical insights, particularly around the short incubation period of the virus, extremely high viral shedding from the nose, as well as the utility of lateral flow tests, with potential implications for public health.”</p> <p>The findings, published on Springer Nature’s pre-print server, and which have not yet been peer-reviewed, detail the outcomes in 36 healthy, young participants with no immunity to the virus. The volunteers were monitored at a specialist unit at the Royal Free hospital in London, and experienced no severe symptoms.</p> <p>The study found that the infection first appears in the throat and that infectious virus peaks about five days into infection, by which point the nose has a much higher viral load than the throat. The study also suggested that lateral flow tests are a reassuringly reliable indicator of whether infectious virus is present. Swabbing the nose and throat makes it more likely to detect infections during the first few days, the work suggests.</p> <p>“We found that overall, lateral flow tests correlate very well with the presence of infectious virus,” said Chiu. “Even though in the first day or two they may be less sensitive, if you use them correctly and repeatedly, and act on them if they read positive, this will have a major impact on interrupting viral spread.”</p> <p>The study also revealed that of the 18 people who became infected, all had similar viral loads regardless of whether they developed symptoms, underlining the role of asymptomatic transmission.</p> <p>Prof Wendy Barclay, the head of the department of infectious disease at Imperial College London, said: “A lot of people could be walking around shedding virus and not realising. It’s really marked with this virus.”</p> <p>Intriguingly, some of those who did not meet the threshold for being infected also had very low levels of virus detectable in their noses and throats, suggesting that they may have experienced a very short-lived infection that was seen off by immune activity in the lining of the nose and throat.</p> <p>The team are expected to publish further findings giving a unique window into the earliest phase of the immune response, during the first hours and days after encountering the virus.</p> <p>The team say the trial paves the way for future challenge studies that could help accelerate the development of the next generation of vaccines and antiviral drugs. Phase 3 studies have become increasingly difficult to plan due to the erratic levels of transmission in the population. Challenge studies are far quicker and require far fewer participants to establish efficacy.</p>

	<p>Prof Sir Jonathan Van-Tam, the deputy chief medical officer for England, said: “Scientifically, these studies offer real advantage because the timing of exposure to the virus is always known exactly, therefore things like the interval between exposure and the profile of virus shedding can be accurately described.</p> <p>“This important study has provided further key data on Covid-19 and how it spreads, which is invaluable in learning more about this novel virus, so we can fine-tune our response.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Flurry of diplomacy in Ukraine crisis
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/ukraine-russia-news#key-takeaways-from-a-flurry-of-diplomacy-in-the-ukraine-crisis
GIST	<p>When he spoke about Ukraine on Tuesday for the first time in over a month, President Vladimir V. Putin’s signal that Russia was open to a diplomatic resolution seemed to cool temperatures — at least for the moment. But it also illustrated the vast gulf between Moscow’s demands and what Western nations are even willing to discuss.</p> <p>Here are some takeaways:</p> <p>President Putin breaks his silence. It was notable that Mr. Putin did not repeat his earlier threatening language on Tuesday, saying that “dialogue will be continued.”</p> <p>But he made it clear that the chasm between what Russia wants and what the United States and NATO will discuss remains vast.</p> <p>He also continued to accuse the West of trying to goad Russia into a conflict, saying that the crisis was an attempt “to contain Russia’s development” and a pretext for imposing economic sanctions.</p> <p>The U.S. has slightly toned down its warnings, but is sending more troops. Amid a burst of diplomatic meetings — and after criticism from President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine that the United States’ talk of war was unhelpful — the Biden administration appears to have softened its tone.</p> <p>“We are still pursuing a diplomatic solution to give the Russians an off-ramp,” Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, told NPR on Tuesday.</p> <p>But President Biden’s deployment of about 3,000 additional American troops to Eastern Europe, which officials announced on Wednesday, signaled that the threat of conflict has not passed.</p> <p>European leaders are pursuing one-on-one contact with Mr. Putin. European nations have a keen interest in defusing tensions, partly because if a Russian invasion prompts harsh sanctions against Moscow, their economies — which are far more closely linked to Russia’s than that of the United States — would suffer.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 US troops to deploy NATO eastern Europe
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/ukraine-russia-news#us-troops-will-be-deployed-to-nato-allies-in-eastern-europe
GIST	<p>President Biden has approved the deployment of about 3,000 additional American troops to Eastern Europe, administration officials said on Wednesday.</p> <p>The troops, including 1,000 already in Germany, will head to Poland and Romania, the Pentagon spokesman, John F. Kirby, said. Their purpose will be to reassure NATO allies that while the United States has no intention of sending troops into Ukraine, where President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has</p>

been threatening an invasion, Mr. Biden would protect America's NATO allies from any Russian aggression.

"It's important that we send a strong signal to Mr. Putin and the world that NATO matters," Mr. Kirby told reporters at a news conference. "We are making it clear that we are going to be prepared to defend out NATO allies if it comes to that."

At the moment, Russia is threatening Ukraine, not Romania or Poland. But Mr. Putin has made clear his distaste for both NATO and the post-Cold War redrawing of the map of Europe, which put former Soviet republics and satellite countries in the West's foremost military alliance at his doorstep.

The president's decision comes days after Pentagon leaders said that Mr. Putin had deployed the necessary troops and military hardware to conduct an invasion of Ukraine. Senior Defense Department officials also said that the tense standoff was leading the United States, its NATO allies and Russia into uncharted territory.

The number of Russian troops assembled at Ukraine's borders has reached well north of 100,000, the officials said, publicly confirming for the first time what intelligence analysts have described for weeks.

Close to 2,000 of the troops — most of them coming from the 82nd Airborne in Fort Bragg, N.C. — will be going to Poland, Mr. Kirby said. While many of those troops are paratroopers, Mr. Kirby said he did not expect the Airborne troops to deploy to Poland in a "tactical operation," which would raise the ire of Russia even more.

The troops being moved to Romania will complement French troops being deployed there, Mr. Kirby said.

The administration has not ruled out sending additional troops to Europe, and still has 8,500 American troops on "high alert" for possible deployment to a NATO rapid response force.

Mr. Kirby also said there would be no change in the status of the small number of American troops in Ukraine. More than 150 U.S. military advisers are in Ukraine, trainers who have for years worked near Lviv, in the country's west, far from the front lines. The current group includes Special Operations forces, mostly Army Green Berets, as well as National Guard trainers from Florida's 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

"It's a big, unambiguous signal," said Jim Townsend, a former top Pentagon official for Europe and NATO policy. "It's also significant that they are going to the Black Sea. Finally, the Black Sea region is being recognized as a major theater. It's not just the Baltics."

James G. Stavridis, a retired four-star Navy admiral who was the supreme allied commander at NATO, echoed that assessment.

"This is a smart, tight and focused deployment that provides real combat punch by linking up with the very capable U.S. troops already stationed in Europe," he said. "But its symbolic value is even higher in reassuring the Baltics and Eastern Europeans that NATO is tangible and real in its deployable combat power."

There are currently 4,000 American troops deployed to Poland and 900 in Romania, as well as about 100 U.S. forces in Lithuania, and 60 in Latvia and Estonia on temporary, rotational assignment.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE
02/02 Malicious npm packages threaten web apps

SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/malicious-npm-packages-web-apps/178137/
GIST	<p>More than 1,300 malicious packages have been identified in the most oft-downloaded JavaScript package repository used by developers, npm, in the last six months — a rapid increase that showcases how npm has become a launchpad for a range of nefarious activities.</p> <p>New research from open-source security and management firm WhiteSource has discovered the disturbing increase in the delivery of malicious npm packages, which are used as building blocks for web applications. Any app using a malicious code block could be serving up data theft, cryptojacking, botnet delivery and more to its users.</p> <p>Out of the malicious packages found, 14 percent were designed to steal sensitive information like credentials, while nearly 82 percent of those packages were performing “reconnaissance,” which involved adversaries actively or passively gathering information that can be used to support targeting, the firm said.</p> <p>Because npm packages in general are being downloaded upwards of 20 billion times a week—and thus installed across countless web-facing components of software and applications across the world—exploiting them means a sizeable playing field for attackers, researchers said in their Wednesday report. An average of 32,000 new npm package versions are published every month (17,000 daily), and a full 68 percent of developers depend upon it to create rich online functionality, according to WhiteSource.</p> <p>That level of activity enables threat actors to launch a number of software supply-chain attacks, researchers said. Accordingly, WhiteSource investigated malicious activity in npm, identifying more than 1,300 malicious packages in 2021 — which were subsequently removed, but may have been brought into any number of applications before they were taken down.</p> <p>“Attackers are focusing more efforts on using npm for their own nefarious purposes and targeting the software supply chain using npm,” they wrote in the report. “In these supply-chain attacks, adversaries are shifting their attacks upstream by infecting existing components that are distributed downstream and installed potentially millions of times.”</p> <p>To boot, with so many npm packages being released monthly, it’s also easy for some vulnerabilities to slip through the cracks, researchers noted.</p> <p>Why Attack npm?</p> <p>JavaScript is the most commonly used programming language, and there are about 16.4 million JavaScript developers globally, according to WhiteSource.</p> <p>Its widespread use and deployment across applications and systems that use the internet also makes the JavaScript ecosystem a major target for attackers, researchers said. Npm itself is one of the most popular package managers and registries, containing more than 1.8 million active packages, each of which has an average of 12.3 versions, researchers said.</p> <p>Package registries like npm also store packages, the metadata associated with them and the configurations that are needed to install them — all of which represent attack vectors, making it challenging for IT to keep up, especially when the need to track versions of packages is factored in.</p> <p>Further, though npm and other registries play an integral role in the JavaScript development process, “there is a minimum standard of security associated with them” because most of them are maintained and verified by open-source communities or consortiums, researchers said. This makes them ripe for exploitation by attackers, according to WhiteSource.</p> <p>Indeed, attackers are certainly onto the malicious opportunity npm represents and have already targeted its popular registries in several high-profile attacks last year.</p>

In January, attackers used npm to spread the CursedGrabber malware [that could steal Discord tokens](#) and thus enable attacks on users' accounts and servers. Then in July, researchers found [a malicious npm package](#) that was stealing passwords via Chrome's account-recovery tool.

In December, attackers [used npm to target Discord](#) again, hiding malicious code within the package manager to harvest Discord tokens that can be used to take over unsuspecting users' accounts and servers.

Common Malware, Targets and Impact

WhiteSource researchers identified some of the most common malware hidden in malicious npm packages that they observed in the report, with payloads that can steal credentials or crypto and run botnets among the top offenders.

Some of the malicious packages and their functionality that WhiteSource identified in its investigation include the following:

- **mos-sass-loader and css-resources-loader**, which engage in brandjacking for remote code execution (RCE);
- **circle-admin-web-app and browser-warning-ui**, which select external packages including malware for download;
- **@grubhubprod_cookbook**, which engages in dependency confusion aimed at entering Grubhub company data
- **H98dx**, a remote shell executable that runs upon install to infect machine; and
- **Azure-web-pubsub-express**, which enables data aggregation that collects host information.

Researchers also described a supply-chain attack that they observed in October using a popular npm library, ua-parser-js, which is used to parse user agent strings to identify a user's browser, OS, device and other attributes. The library has more than 7 million weekly downloads, they said.

Threat actors used ua-parser-js to leverage the software supply chain and gain access to sensitive data, as well as vulnerable enterprise resources in the cloud, researchers explained.

"Attackers inserted malicious code into three versions of ua-parser-js after seemingly taking over the developer's npm account," researchers wrote. "Three new versions of this package were released in an attempt to get users to download them."

While the previously clean version of the package was 0.7.28, the attacker published identical 0.7.29, 0.8.0 and 1.0.0 packages, "each containing malicious code that was activated upon installation," they explained.

The author of the package responded quickly to mitigate attacks and attempt to minimize the number of people who were inadvertently installing a malicious package by publishing 0.7.30, 0.8.1 and 1.0.1, researchers added.

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HEADLINE	02/02 UpdateAgent infects Mac computers
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/new-variant-of-updateagent-malware.html
GIST	<p>Microsoft on Wednesday shed light on a previously undocumented Mac trojan that it said has underwent several iterations since its first appearance in September 2020, effectively granting it an "increasing progression of sophisticated capabilities."</p> <p>The company's Microsoft 365 Defender Threat Intelligence Team dubbed the new malware family "UpdateAgent," charting its evolution from a barebones information stealer to a second-stage payload distributor as part of multiple attack waves observed in 2021.</p> <p>"The latest campaign saw the malware installing the evasive and persistent Adload adware, but UpdateAgent's ability to gain access to a device can theoretically be further leveraged to fetch other, potentially more dangerous payloads," the researchers said.</p>

	<p>The actively in-development malware is said to be propagated via drive-by downloads or advertisement pop-ups that masquerade as legitimate software like video applications and support agents, even as the authors have made steady improvements that have transformed UpdateAgent into a progressively persistent piece of malware.</p> <p>Chief among the advancements include the capability to abuse existing user permissions to surreptitiously perform malicious activities and circumvent macOS Gatekeeper controls, a security feature that ensures only trusted applications from identified developers can be installed on a system.</p> <p>In addition, UpdateAgent has been found to take advantage of public cloud infrastructure, namely Amazon S3 and CloudFront services, to host its second-stage payloads, including adware, in the form of .DMG or .ZIP files.</p> <p>Once installed, the Adload malware makes use of ad injection software and man-in-the-middle (MitM) techniques to intercept and reroute users' internet traffic through the attacker's servers to insert rogue ads into web pages and search engine results to increase the chances of multiple infections on the devices.</p> <p>"UpdateAgent is uniquely characterized by its gradual upgrading of persistence techniques, a key feature that indicates this trojan will likely continue to use more sophisticated techniques in future campaigns," the researchers cautioned.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Civicom exposed 8TB of data
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/conferencing-service-provider-civicom-8tb-data/
GIST	<p>New York City-based company known for providing audio, web conferencing, and market research services was found exposing a trove of personal and sensitive data to its clients.</p> <p>The company in discussion is Civicom, Inc., who, according to its LinkedIn page, claims to provide “the best audio and web conferencing services on the planet, webinar services, global marketing research services, leading transcription/CRM entry service, general transcription service, online jury trials, and more.”</p> <p>It is worth noting that Civicom is home to hundreds of employees with offices all over the United States, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. This also indicates the company’s strong customer base and the devastating consequences of such large-scale exposure of data to the public.</p> <p>What’s worse is that the S3 bucket was left exposed without any password or security authentication meaning anyone with knowledge of how to find misconfigured databases could have accessed the data.</p> <p>What happened</p> <p>According to the Website Planet Security Team, who originally identified the database, Civicom exposed 8 terabytes of records containing more than 100,000 files, thanks to one of its misconfigured Amazon S3 buckets.</p> <p>However, due to the humongous size of the database, it was physically impossible for researchers to scan each file. Nevertheless, their analysis revealed that the exposed records included thousands of hours of audio and video recordings containing private conversations as well as written transcripts belonging to the company’s clients.</p> <p>Additionally, personally identifiable information (PII) such as employees’ full names and photos were also exposed in the incident.</p> <p>Civicom took months to secure the database</p>

In its [blog post](#), the Website Planet Security Team revealed that the AWS S3 bucket was online since 2018. The researchers identified the exposure on October 28th, 2021, and informed Civicom about the incident on October 30th, 2021.

However, after three months, on January 26th, 2022, Civicom responded to Website Planet and secured the bucket. Nevertheless, the good news is that the bucket is not available publically.

Impact on the company and clients

It is yet unclear whether the database was [accessed by a third party with malicious intent](#) such as ransomware gangs or threat actors. But in case it did, it would be devastating for Civicom, its employees, and clients.

It is also possible that threat actors can use the exposed recordings to steal trade secrets and other sensitive information from the company's clients. Moreover, a competitor can also pay big bucks for the trove of information amid the COVID-19 pandemic where it is [difficult for businesses to survive](#).

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HEADLINE	02/02 Wormhole platform hacked; \$326M stolen
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/cryptocurrency/wormhole-cryptocurrency-platform-hacked-to-steal-326-million/
GIST	<p>Hackers have exploited a vulnerability in the Wormhole cross-chain crypto platform to steal \$326 million in cryptocurrency.</p> <p>Wormhole is a platform that allows users to transfer cryptocurrency across different blockchains. It does this by locking the original token in a smart contract and then minting a wrapped version of the stored token that can be transferred to another blockchain.</p> <p>The platform supports the Avalanche, Oasis, Binance Smart Chain, Ethereum, Polygon, Solana, and Terra blockchains.</p> <p>Wormhole reportedly hacked for \$326 million</p> <p>At 3:42 PM EST today, Wormhole announced that they shut down their platform as they investigated an exploit on their network.</p> <p>Using the exploit, a threat actor minted and stole 120k wrapped Ether tokens on the Solana blockchain. Of these 120k tokens, the threat actors converted 80,000 to Ethereum and left the rest on the Solana blockchain, where they began to sell it.</p> <p>Wormhole later confirmed that a hacker stole 120k wrapped Ethereum (wEth) and that they were adding Ethereum to their platform to ensure all wETH is properly backed.</p> <p>Blockchain analytics company Elliptic says that a Wormhole representative sent a message to the address owned by the hacker offering a \$10 million bug bounty under a "whitehat agreement."</p> <p>This agreement requires the return of all stolen funds and details on the vulnerability and the exploit that was used.</p> <p><i>"This is the Wormhole Deployer: We noticed you were able to exploit the Solana VAA verification and mint tokens. We'd like to offer you a whitehat agreement, and present you a bug bounty of \$10 million for exploit details, and returning the wETH you've minted. You can reach out to us at contact@certus.one" - Message sent to attackers by Wormhole.</i></p> <p>It is unknown if the hacker has replied to the message and is willing to work with Wormhole to recover the assets.</p>

	The Wormhole attack is now the second-largest attack on DeFi services, with the largest being Poly Network, which was hacked for over \$600 million in August .
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HEADLINE	02/02 Facebook loses more users than gained
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/02/02/facebook-earnings-meta/
GIST	<p>Facebook parent Meta’s quarterly earnings report on Wednesday revealed a startling statistic: For the first time ever, the company’s growth is stagnating around the world.</p> <p>Facebook lost daily users for the first time in its 18-year history — falling by about half a million users in the last three months of 2021, to 1.93 billion logging in each day. The loss was greatest in Africa and Latin America, suggesting that the company’s product is saturated globally — and that its long quest to add as many users as possible has peaked.</p> <p>Meta’s stock price plummeted more than 20 percent in after-hours trading following the news, dropping to about \$249 per share and threatening to wipe about \$200 billion off its market value. The company is facing challenges on multiple fronts, as competitor TikTok booms, federal and international regulators scrutinize its business practices, and it begins a lofty transition to focus on the “metaverse.”</p> <p>That could also drop its ranking among the most valuable companies in the world.</p> <p>It adds up to a dizzying blow for a company that has long been defined by its relentless obsession with growth. The social network’s meteoric rise from a Harvard dorm room in 2004 to 1 billion monthly active users in 2012 — and then 2 billion just five years later — was fueled by a mission to connect the world, including efforts to bring more people online in developing countries so it could sign them up, too.</p> <p>Its newest ambition is off to a slow start, at least by one key metric. Facebook showed for the first time on Wednesday how much of a money-losing proposition its investment in virtual- and augmented-reality hardware is — the suite of products the company dubs the metaverse.</p> <p>Facebook Reality Labs, the company’s hardware division that builds the Oculus Quest headset, lost \$3.3 billion in the quarter, despite bringing in \$877 million in revenue.</p> <p>But even that figure is a tiny fraction of Facebook’s total revenue — \$33.67 billion last quarter — primarily derived from targeted advertising on its main social network.</p> <p>The company has made significant investments toward its aspiration of becoming a hardware giant, including hiring over 10,000 people and rebranding itself to Meta. But that transition is still in its early days.</p> <p>“Last year was about putting a stake in the ground for where we are heading; this year is going to be about executing,” CEO Mark Zuckerberg said on the company’s earnings call.</p> <p>Executives hope that the company can reinvent itself with a focus on hardware, and that doing so will distract from its political problems. Tens of thousands of internal Facebook documents brought forth by a whistleblower last year revealed that is accelerating societal polarization and that its algorithms have amplified misinformation and helped violent groups organize on the platform. The company is under intense government scrutiny, facing a major antitrust case in the United States and expected laws in Europe that could transform its business. It recently shuttered its cryptocurrency project, Diem, in response to intractable political pushback.</p> <p>Facebook’s user growth has stalled in the United States and Europe for the past several years, but the company previously made up for it by consistently adding users all over the world. These new numbers, which show a dip in daily active users on the Facebook app, suggest that Facebook is becoming saturated globally, as well — a trend that demonstrates another reason the company is pushing so forcefully into new arenas such as hardware.</p>

But not all growth trends were negative. The company's family of apps, which encompass Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger continued to modestly add users. The number logging in monthly to Facebook continued to grow, even as the number of daily users dropped. And the company continued to earn slightly more revenue per user, as well.

The company also said it was changing its stock ticker symbol to META from FB. It [changed its corporate name](#) from Facebook to Meta in October, saying at the time that it wanted to reflect its focus on the metaverse. But the change also came amid regulatory scrutiny of the company's size and power, which was heightened after whistleblower Frances Haugen turned over internal company documents to Congress and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

Zuckerberg spoke several times on the earnings call about the competitive threat the company faces from video platform TikTok, and he explained that this competition was the reason the company was [pushing hard to develop](#) its short-form video product, Reels.

Zuckerberg conceded on a call with investors that the company faces growing competition in the race to capture people's attention online and would need to work to make sure Reels brought in more money.

"People have a lot of choices for how they want to spend their time, and apps like TikTok are growing very quickly," he said. "And this is why our focus on Reels is so important over the long term."

But the CEO's unusually frequent references to competition also could be read as a message to critics who say the company is an all-powerful monopoly.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Israel police used spyware without warrant
SOURCE	https://www.thevibes.com/articles/world/53367/israeli-cops-appear-to-admit-use-of-spyware-without-warrant
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM – Israeli police on Tuesday appeared to acknowledge they had used espionage technology without a warrant, after allegations emerged last month that they had used Israeli firm NSO Group's controversial Pegasus spyware.</p> <p>Israel's justice minister had pledged a full investigation after business daily Calcalist said police had used Pegasus against Israelis at the forefront of protests against former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.</p> <p>The police had firmly denied the allegations, and commissioner Yaakov Shabtai had said that "police have not found any evidence to support this information".</p> <p>But on Tuesday, police said an in-depth investigation had revealed that "new elements changed certain aspects of the matter".</p> <p>In a statement that did not mention Pegasus or the NSO Group, police said those elements had led "the public prosecutor to take immediate measures to prevent potential violations" regarding cyber-surveillance, adding that the police "comply" with the measures.</p> <p>"All police officers must cooperate with the work of the commission of inquiry, providing all the required information and authorising access to police technical systems," the statement said.</p> <p>Pegasus, a surveillance product that can switch on a phone's camera or microphone and harvest its data, has remained a source of global controversy following revelations last year it was used to spy on journalists and dissidents worldwide.</p> <p>NSO last month would neither confirm nor deny it sold technologies to Israeli police, stressing it does "not operate the system once sold to its governmental customers and it is not involved in any way in the system's operation".</p>

	<p>“NSO sells its products under licence and regulation to intelligence and law enforcement agencies to prevent terror and crime under court orders and the local laws of their countries,” it had said in a statement sent to AFP.</p> <p>Israeli security forces have wide leeway to conduct surveillance within Israel with judicial approval.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 CoinStomp: new cryptojacking malware
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/meet-coinstomp-new-cryptojacking-malware-targets-asian-cloud-service-providers/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Researchers have discovered a new malware family targeting cloud services to mine cryptocurrency.</p> <p>Dubbed CoinStomp, the malware is comprised of shell scripts that "attempt to exploit cloud compute instances hosted by cloud service providers for the purpose of mining cryptocurrency," according to Cado Security.</p> <p>The firm's researchers say that the overall purpose of CoinStomp is to quietly compromise instances in order to harness computing power to illicit mine for cryptocurrency, a form of attack known as cryptojacking.</p> <p>A number of attack attempts have been focused, so far, on cloud service providers in Asia.</p> <p>Clues in code also referenced Xanthe, a cryptojacking threat group recently tied to the Abcbot botnet. However, the clue -- found in a defunct payload URL -- is not enough to firmly establish who is responsible for CoinStomp and may have been included in "an attempt to foil attribution," according to the team.</p> <p>CoinStomp has a number of interesting capabilities. One is its reliance on "timestomping" -- the manipulation of timestamps by running the touch -- command on Linux systems to update file modification and access times.</p> <p>"It seems likely that timestomping was employed to obfuscate usage of the chmod and chattr utilities, as forensic tools would display the copied versions of these binaries as being last accessed (executed) at the timestamp used in the touch command," Cado Security noted.</p> <p>In addition, the malware will attempt to tamper with Linux server cryptographic policies. These policies can prevent malicious executables from being dropped or executed, and so CoinStomp's developer has included features to disable system-wide cryptographic policies through a kill command.</p> <p>"This could undo attempts to harden the target machine by administrators, ensuring that the malware achieves its objectives," the researchers say.</p> <p>CoinStomp will then establish a connection to its command-and-control (C2) server via a reverse shell. The script then downloads and executes further payloads as system-wide systemd services, complete with root privileges.</p> <p>These include binaries to potentially create backdoors and a custom version of XMRig, legitimate Monero mining software abused for criminal purposes.</p> <p>"CoinStomp demonstrates the sophistication and knowledge of attackers in the cloud security space," Cado Security says. "Employing anti-forensics techniques and weakening the target machine by removing cryptographic policies demonstrates not only a knowledge of Linux security measures but also an understanding of the incident response process."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 SolarWinds malware undetected for years
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/new-malware-used-by-solarwinds.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The threat actor behind the supply chain compromise of SolarWinds has continued to expand its malware arsenal with new tools and techniques that were deployed in attacks as early as 2019, once indicative of the elusive nature of the campaigns and the adversary's ability to maintain persistent access for years.</p> <p>According to cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike, which detailed the novel tactics adopted by the Nobelium hacking group last week, two sophisticated malware families were placed on victim systems — a Linux variant of GoldMax and a new implant dubbed TrailBlazer — long before the scale of the attacks came to light.</p> <p>Nobelium, the Microsoft-assigned moniker for the SolarWinds intrusion in December 2020, is also tracked by the wider cybersecurity community under the names UNC2452 (FireEye), SolarStorm (Unit 42), StellarParticle (CrowdStrike), Dark Halo (Volexity), and Iron Ritual (Secureworks).</p> <p>The malicious activities have since been attributed to a Russian state-sponsored actor called APT29 (also known as The Dukes and Cozy Bear), a cyber espionage operation associated with the country's Foreign Intelligence Service that's known to be active since at least 2008.</p> <p>GoldMax (aka SUNSHUTTLE), which was discovered by Microsoft and FireEye in March 2021, is a Golang-based malware that acts as a command-and-control backdoor, establishing a secure connection with a remote server to execute arbitrary commands on the compromised machine.</p> <p>In September 2021, Kaspersky revealed details of a second variant of the GoldMax backdoor called Tomiris that was deployed against several government organizations in an unnamed CIS member state in December 2020 and January 2021.</p> <p>The latest iteration is a previously undocumented but functionally identical Linux implementation of the second-stage malware that was installed in victim environments in mid-2019, predating all other identified samples built for the Windows platform to date.</p> <p>Also delivered around the same timeframe was TrailBlazer, a modular backdoor that offers attackers a path to cyber espionage, while sharing commonalities with GoldMax in the way it masquerades its command-and-control (C2) traffic as legitimate Google Notifications HTTP requests.</p> <p>Other uncommon channels used by the actor to facilitate the attacks include —</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credential hopping for obscuring lateral movement • Office 365 (O365) Service Principal and Application hijacking, impersonation, and manipulation, and • Theft of browser cookies for bypassing multi-factor authentication <p>Additionally, the operators carried out multiple instances of domain credential theft months apart, each time leveraging a different technique, one among them being the use of Mimikatz password stealer in-memory, from an already compromised host to ensure access for extended periods of time.</p> <p>"The StellarParticle campaign, associated with the Cozy Bear adversary group, demonstrates this threat actor's extensive knowledge of Windows and Linux operating systems, Microsoft Azure, O365, and Active Directory, and their patience and covert skill set to stay undetected for months — and in some cases, years," the researchers said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Arid Viper APT strikes Palestinian groups
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/arid-viper-hackers-strike-palestine-with-political-lures-and-trojans/?&web_view=true

GIST	<p>The Arid Viper cyberattack group is back with a new campaign targeting Palestinian organizations and activists.</p> <p>The advanced persistent threat (APT) group, believed to be located in Gaza -- an area of conflict and hotbed of tension between Israel and Palestine -- attacks organizations worldwide but now currently appears to be focused on entities related to Palestine's politics.</p> <p>Arid Viper, also known as Desert Falcon, Two-tailed Scorpion, or APT C-23, has been around since at least 2015. In the past, the group has been responsible for spear phishing attacks against Palestinian law enforcement, the military, educational establishments, and the Israel Security Agency (ISA).</p> <p>Windows and Android malware have been utilized previously, the latter of which is spread through fake app stores. Delphi malware, however, has featured heavily in previous campaigns and still seems to be the weapon of choice for Arid Viper.</p> <p>On Wednesday, researchers from Cisco Talos said the ongoing campaign uses a Delphi-based Micropsia implant to strike activists.</p> <p>"The most recent samples found by Talos lead us to believe this is a campaign linked to the previous campaign we reported on in 2017," the researchers say, adding that the main focus of Arid Viper is on cyberespionage -- and targets are selected by the operators based on the political motivation of the "liberation of Palestine."</p> <p>The initial attack vector is phishing emails, with included content linked to the Palestinian political situation and usually stolen from news agencies. For example, one decoy document was related to Palestinian family reunification, published in 2021, whereas another contained a record of activist questions.</p> <p>If an intended victim opens one of these documents, the implant triggers, extracting a range of Remote Access Trojan (RAT) capabilities. The malware will collect operating system and antivirus data, exfiltrate it to the operator's command-and-control (C2) server, steal content on the machine, take screenshots, and conduct further surveillance activities.</p> <p>A timer contained in the implant will also establish persistence on the target machine through the Startup folder.</p> <p>"The continued use of the same TTPs over the past four years indicates that the group doesn't feel affected by the public exposure of its campaigns and implants and continues to operate business as usual," Talos says. "This complete lack of deterrence makes them a dangerous group once they decide to target an organization or individual."</p> <p>In related news this week, Talos and Cybereason disclosed three separate APT campaigns believed to be the work of state-backed Iranian cybercriminals. MuddyWater, Phosphorus, and Moses Staff are targeting entities in Turkey, the US, Israel, Europe, and the Middle East.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 British snack giant disrupted; ransomware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/kp-snacks-giant-hit-by-conti-ransomware-deliveries-disrupted/
GIST	<p>KP Snacks, a major producer of popular British snacks has been hit by the Conti ransomware group affecting distribution to leading supermarkets.</p> <p>Kenyon Produce (KP) Snacks includes popular brands such as PopChips, Skips, Hula Hoops, Penn State pretzels, McCoy's, Wheat Crunchies, etc.</p>

KP Snacks has more than 2,000 employees and [estimates](#) put the company's annual revenue at over \$600 million, making them an attractive target for threat actors.

Conti plans to leak sensitive documents

A cyber attack on British snack giant, KP Snacks has now escalated to supply chain disruption around the UK.

Because of the attack, deliveries from the company to leading superstores are [reportedly](#) being delayed or canceled altogether. According to notifications sent to supermarkets by KP Snacks, the supply shortage issues can last until the end of March.

A source informed BleepingComputer that the company's internal network had been breached with threat actors gaining access to and encrypting sensitive files, including employee records and financial documents.

Private leak pages seen by BleepingComputer show Conti ransomware group claiming responsibility for the attack...

On the private leak page, Conti shared samples of credit card statements, birth certificates, spreadsheets with employee addresses and phone numbers, confidential agreements, and other sensitive documents.

Darknet intel provider *DarkFeed* had also [posted](#) yesterday about Conti ransomware op giving the company **five days** before leaking even more proprietary data on their public blog.

It isn't clear if KP Snacks is currently negotiating with Conti or if it will pay a ransom.

"On Friday, 28 January we became aware that we were unfortunately victims of a ransomware incident," a KP Snacks spokesperson told BleepingComputer.

"As soon as we became aware of the incident, we enacted our cybersecurity response plan and engaged a leading forensic information technology firm and legal counsel to assist us in our investigation."

The company's internal IT teams are working with third party security experts to assess the situation.

"We have been continuing to keep our colleagues, customers, and suppliers informed of any developments and apologise for any disruption this may have caused," concluded the company in their statement to us.

Conti repeatedly hits high-profile organizations

[Conti](#) is a Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) operation linked to the [Wizard Spider](#) Russian cybercrime group, also known for other notorious malware, including Ryuk, TrickBot, and BazarLoader.

The ransomware group's affiliates breach targets' networks after corporate devices get infected with [BazarLoader or TrickBot malware](#), providing them remote access to the compromised system.

In recent weeks, Conti has rapidly climbed up the ranks among ransomware groups after repeatedly targeting prominent organizations.

Last month, Conti claimed responsibility for [attacking Bank Indonesia](#), the country's central bank, and began leaking its data.

In December 2021, Conti had breached the systems of [Nordic Choice hotel group](#), freezing the hotel properties' key cards.

The ransomware gang's former targets have included Ireland's [Department of Health \(DoH\)](#) and [Health Service Executive](#) (HSE), and [marketing giant RR Donnelly \(RRD\)](#).

	Due to increased Conti activity, the FBI, CISA, and the NSA US have also recently issued an advisory warning of an increased number of Conti ransomware attacks .
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HEADLINE	02/02 New SEO poisoning pushes malware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/seo-poisoning-pushes-malware-laced-zoom-teamviewer-visual-studio-installers/
GIST	<p>A new SEO poisoning campaign is underway, dropping the Batloader and Atera Agent malware onto the systems of targeted professionals searching for productivity tool downloads, such as Zoom, TeamViewer, and Visual Studio.</p> <p>These campaigns rely on the compromise of legitimate websites to plant malicious files or URLs that redirect users to sites that host malware disguised as popular apps.</p> <p>Upon downloading and executing the software installers, the victims unknowingly infect themselves with malware and remote access software.</p> <p>Poisoning search results</p> <p>As part of this campaign, the threat actors perform search engine optimization (SEO) techniques to legitimate compromised sites into search results for popular applications.</p> <p>The targeted keywords are for popular applications like Zoom, Microsoft Visual Studio 2015, TeamViewer, and others.</p> <p>When a user clicks on the search engine link, they will be brought to the compromised site that includes a Traffic Direction System (TDS). Traffic Direction Systems are scripts that check for various attributes of a visitor and use that information to decide whether they should be shown the legitimate webpage or be redirected to another malicious site under the attacker's control.</p> <p>In similar campaigns in the past, the TDS would only redirect visitors if they came from a search engine result. Otherwise, the TDS would show the visitor the normal and legitimate blog post.</p> <p>This technique helps prevent analysis by security researchers as it would only show the malicious behavior to those who arrived from a search engine.</p> <p>If a visitor is redirected, the malicious site will show them a fake forum discussion where a user asks how to get a particular app, and another phony user provides a download link...</p> <p>Clicking the download link will cause the site to create a packaged malware installer using the name of the sought-after application. As the malware packages include the legitimate software, many users will not realize they have also been infected with malware.</p> <p>Some of the malicious domains found by Mandiant researchers being used in this campaign are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cmdadminu[.]com • zoomvideo-s[.]com • cloudfiletechnology[.]com • commandaadmin[.]com • clouds222[.]com • websekir[.]com • team-viewer[.]site • zoomvideo[.]site • sweepcakesoffers[.]com • pornofilmspremium[.]com • kdsjdsadas[.]online • bartmaaz[.]com

- [firsone1\[.\]online](#)

Dropping a malware cocktail

When the downloaded program is executed, it will perform two different infection chains that drop malware payloads on the device.

The first infection chain starts with installing the fake software bundled with the BATLOADER malware, fetching and executing more payloads like Ursnif and Atera Agent.

The second infection chain drops ATERA Agent directly, bypassing the malware loading stages. Atera is a legitimate remote management solution that is being abused for lateral movement and deeper infiltration.

In the first infection chain, the actors use MSHTA to execute a legitimate Windows DLL (AppResolver) laced with a malicious VBScript to change Microsoft Defender settings and add specific exclusions.

Interestingly, the PE Authenticode signature in the Windows file remains valid even though the actors have added their malicious code to it, which is a problem that Microsoft attempted to address with the [CVE-2020-1599 fix](#).

[Mandiant's report](#) describes the bypassing technique as follows:

We observed arbitrary script data was appended to the signature section beyond the end of the ASN.1 of a legitimately signed Windows PE file. The resultant polyglot file maintains a valid signature as long as the file has a file extension other than '.hta'. This polyglot file will successfully execute the script contents if it is executed with Mshta.exe, as Mshta.exe will skip the PE's bytes, locate the script at the end, and execute it.

Link to Conti gang?

Mandiant's analysts underline that some of the techniques seen in this campaign match the [content of the Conti playbooks](#) that a disgruntled affiliate leaked last August.

While the campaign could be replicated by unrelated actors, loading the VBScript from a signed Windows file indicates a skillful operator.

Deploying ransomware payloads through Atera Agent would be fairly simple, while the targeting scope defined by the SEO lures is company-focused.

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HEADLINE	02/02 UEFI firmware flaws 25 computer vendors
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/uefi-firmware-vulnerabilities-affect-at-least-25-computer-vendors/
GIST	<p>Researchers from firmware protection company Binarly have discovered critical vulnerabilities in the UEFI firmware from InsydeH2O used by multiple computer vendors such as Fujitsu, Intel, AMD, Lenovo, Dell, ASUS, HP, Siemens, Microsoft, and Acer.</p> <p>UEFI (Unified Extensible Firmware Interface) software is an interface between a device's firmware and the operating system, which handles the booting process, system diagnostics, and repair functions.</p> <p>In total, Binarly found 23 flaws in the InsydeH2O UEFI firmware, most of them in the software's System Management Mode (SMM) that provides system-wide functions such as power management and hardware control.</p> <p>SMM's privileges exceed those of the OS kernel, so any security issues in this space can have severe consequences for the vulnerable system.</p>

More specifically, a local or remote attacker with administrative privileges exploiting SMM flaws could perform the following tasks:

- Invalidate many hardware security features (SecureBoot, Intel BootGuard)
- Install persistent software that cannot be easily erased
- Create backdoors and back communications channels to steal sensitive data

The 23 flaws are tracked as: CVE-2020-27339, CVE-2020-5953, CVE-2021-33625, CVE-2021-33626, CVE-2021-33627, CVE-2021-41837, CVE-2021-41838, CVE-2021-41839, CVE-2021-41840, CVE-2021-41841, CVE-2021-42059, CVE-2021-42060, CVE-2021-42113, CVE-2021-42554, CVE-2021-43323, CVE-2021-43522, CVE-2021-43615, CVE-2021-45969, CVE-2021-45970, CVE-2021-45971, CVE-2022-24030, CVE-2022-24031, CVE-2022-24069.

Of the above, [CVE-2021-45969](#), [CVE-2021-45970](#), and [CVE-2021-45971](#) in the SMM are rated with critical severity, receiving a 9.8 score out of 10.

Ten of the discovered vulnerabilities could be exploited for privilege escalation, twelve memory corruption flaws in SMM, and one is a memory corruption vulnerability in InsydeH2O's Driver eXecution Environment (DXE).

“The root cause of the problem was found in the reference code associated with InsydeH2O firmware framework code,” explains [Binarly's disclosure report](#).

“All of the aforementioned vendors (over 25) were using Insyde-based firmware SDK to develop their pieces of (UEFI) firmware,” the company notes. At the moment, the U.S. CERT Coordination Center [confirmed](#) three vendors with products affected by the security issues found in the InsydeH2O firmware: Fujitsu, Insyde Software Corporation, and Intel (only CVE-2020-5953)

Addressing the problems

Insyde Software has [released firmware updates](#) to fix all identified security vulnerabilities and published [detailed bulletins](#) to assign severity and description for every flaw.

However, these security updates need to be adopted original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and pushed to affected products.

The entire process will take a considerable amount of time for the security updates to reach end-users. It is unlikely that all issues will be addressed in all impacted products, though, because some devices have reached end-of-life and are no longer supported, while others may become obsolete before a patch is ready for them.

At the time of writing, only Insyde, Fujitsu, and Intel have confirmed themselves as affected by the flaws, while Rockwell, Supermicro, and Toshiba were confirmed as not impacted. The rest are investigating.

Binarly credits Fujitsu's incident response team for its quick reaction when receiving the vulnerability reports, and its hands-on approach in helping to scope them correctly.

If you would like to scan your system for the existence of the above flaws, Binarly has published these FwHunt rules [on GitHub](#) to assist with detection.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Fake influencer flags hacking tactics
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/fake-influencer-hacking-tactics/
GIST	A Swiss secure storage company has launched a creative cybersecurity awareness campaign to show how hackers gather personal data from social media.

The [campaign](#) by [pCloud](#) uses a fake influencer account on Instagram ([@thealiceadams](#)) to highlight how users unintentionally give away pieces of sensitive data through their bios and the content they post.

“Through what we share online, the pictures we post and the locations we tag, hackers and criminals can guess your password in seconds, putting your identity and your bank accounts at risk of being stolen,” said a pCloud spokesperson.

In one post from the mock account, the influencer reveals her date of birth by sharing an image of birthday balloons that spell out her age. Other seemingly harmless posts give away information commonly used in passwords and security questions, including her pet’s name, where she went to school and her favorite movie.

Additional posts emphasize the importance of checking photographs for sensitive data before sharing them. Captured in an image of the influencer at her desk is a post-it note upon which a password has been written. Another shot of the influencer dining at a restaurant features her credit card, revealing her bank details.

“You may be posting a picture of your birthday balloons, a heartwarming picture of your newborn baby or snapping that ‘picture perfect’ bar you spent the weekend at. But those seemingly harmless posts could actually be giving away security information that gives hackers access to all your accounts,” said pCloud.

Research performed by pCloud found that the most common themes for passwords that hackers are aware of include the last name followed by a number, date of birth, child or grandchild’s name and date of birth, pet name, place of birth and current place of residence.

Other popular password choices are Qwerty (the first letters on a keyboard), favorite films, foods and nicknames.

The company advised users to leave personal information out of their passwords and make their passwords long and nonsensical, making them more challenging for hackers to guess. It also recommended using different passwords for different accounts so that cracking one password won’t enable a hacker to access all accounts.

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HEADLINE	02/02 ‘Great resignation’ increases security risks?
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/third-employees-exfiltrating-data/
GIST	<p>Nearly one-third (29%) of employees admitted taking data with them when they leave their job, according to new research from Tessian.</p> <p>The findings follow the ‘great resignation’ of 2021, when workers quit their jobs in huge waves following the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, close to three-quarters (71%) of IT leaders believe this trend has increased security risks in their organizations.</p> <p>In addition, nearly half (45%) of IT leaders said they had seen incidents of data exfiltration increase in the past year due to staff taking data with them when they left.</p> <p>The survey of 2000 UK workers also looked at employees' motives for taking such information. The most common reason was that the data would help them in their new job (58%). This was followed by the belief that the information belonged to them because they worked on the document (53%) and to share it with their new employer (44%).</p> <p>The employees most likely to take data with them when leaving their job worked in marketing (63%), HR (37%) and IT (37%).</p>

	<p>The research also found that 55% of workers are considering leaving their jobs in 2022, while two in five (39%) are currently working their notice or actively looking for a new job in the next six months, meaning organizations remain at high risk of data exfiltration.</p> <p>Josh Yavor, chief information security officer at Tessian, commented: “It’s a rather common occurrence for employees in certain roles and teams to take data when they quit their job. While some people do take documents with malicious intent, many don’t even realize that what they are doing is wrong. Organizations have a duty to clearly communicate expectations regarding data ownership, and we need to recognize where there might be a breakdown in communication which has led to a cultural acceptance of employees taking documents when they leave.</p> <p>“The great resignation, and the sharp increase in employee turnover, has exposed an opportunity for security and business leaders to consider a more effective way of addressing insider risk. It comes down to building better security cultures, gaining greater visibility into data loss threats and defining and communicating expectations around data sharing to employees – both company-wide and at departmental level. Being proactive in setting the right policies and expectations is a key step before investing in preventative controls.”</p> <p>A study last year found that over three-quarters (78%) of insider data breaches involved unintentional data exposure or loss rather than any malice.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Walmart dissects new ‘Sugar’ ransomware
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/walmart-dissects-new-sugar-ransomware
GIST	<p>The cyber threat team at retail giant Walmart has dissected a new ransomware family dubbed Sugar, which is available to cybercriminals as a ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS).</p> <p>The Sugar ransomware family is written in Delphi and borrows objects from other ransomware families out there. It was initially spotted in November 2021, but hasn’t been detailed before.</p> <p>Unlike the most prevalent ransomware families out there, Sugar mainly targets individual computers rather than enterprise networks, but that doesn’t make it less dangerous, especially since it is offered as a RaaS.</p> <p>According to Walmart, one of the most interesting features of Sugar is its crypter. Not only does it employ a modified version of the RC4 encryption, but code from the crypter is being reused in the ransomware itself.</p> <p>Because of that, Walmart believes that either both the Sugar ransomware and its crypter are the work of the same developer, or the crypter is being offered to affiliates as part of the service.</p> <p>“The malware is written in Delphi but the interesting part [...] was the reuse of the same routine from the crypter as part of the string decoding in the malware, this would lead us to believe that they have the same dev and the crypter is probably part of the build process or some service the main actor offers to their affiliates,” Walmart’s researchers note.</p> <p>The ransomware’s analysis also brought to light similarities with the ransom note employed by REvil ransomware operators – but also differences and misspellings – and similarities between Sugar’s decryptor page and that of Cl0p.</p> <p>Furthermore, Walmart’s security researchers found similarities with GPLib, a library that contains procedures and functions for encryption and decryption operations.</p> <p>“The file encryption piece for samples we analyzed appears to be using the SCOP encryption algorithm,” they note.</p>

	With major ransomware operations announcing shutdowns (such as BlackMatter) or being the target of law enforcement actions (REvil), new RaaS operations have a lot of space to prosper and even become established threats.
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HEADLINE	02/02 Charming Kitten sharpens its claws
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/charming-kitten-powershell-backdoor/178158/
GIST	<p>The Iranian advanced persistent threat (APT) Charming Kitten is sharpening its claws with a new set of tools, including a novel PowerShell backdoor and related stealth tactics, that show the group evolving yet again. The new tools may signal that it's getting ready to pounce on new victims, researchers believe.</p> <p>Researchers at cybersecurity firm Cybereason discovered the tools, which include a backdoor they dubbed "PowerLess Backdoor," as well as an evasive maneuver to run the backdoor in a .NET context rather than as one that triggers a PowerShell process, the Cybereason Nocturnus Team wrote in a report published Tuesday.</p> <p>"The Cybereason Nocturnus Team was able to identify a new toolset that includes a novel backdoor, malware loaders, a browser info stealer, and a keylogger," Cybereason Senior Malware Researcher Daniel Frank wrote in the report.</p> <p>The team also identified links between Charming Kitten and the Memento ransomware that emerged late last year and until now has been unattributed, signaling that the APT may be moving beyond its typical cyberespionage tactics and into new cybercriminal territory, researchers said.</p> <p>Charming Kitten is a prolific APT believed to be backed by the Iranian government and known by a number of other names – including TA453, APT35, Ajax Security Team, NewsBeef, Newscaster and Phosphorus.</p> <p>The group – which first rose to prominence in 2018 – was extremely active throughout 2020 and 2021 and is best known for targeted cyber-espionage attacks against politicians, journalists, human-rights activists, researchers, scholars and think tanks.</p> <p>Some of the APT's more high-profile attacks occurred in 2020, when the group targeted the Trump and Biden presidential campaigns as well as attendees of two global geo-political summits, the Munich Security Conference and the Think 20 (T20) Summit, in separate and various incidents.</p> <p>New Quiver of Malware</p> <p>The Cybereason Nocturnus team uncovered a raft of new Charming Kitten activity when they investigated threat-intelligence efforts that "included pivoting on an IP address (162.55.136[.]20) that was already attributed to Iranian threat actors by multiple sources, including US CERT," Frank explained.</p> <p>The team took a deeper dive into different files that were downloaded from the IP address and discovered a treasure trove of novel tools as well as links to Memento ransomware, he said.</p> <p>Charming Kitten is now using what researchers have dubbed PowerLess Backdoor, a previously undocumented PowerShell trojan that supports downloading additional payloads, such as a keylogger and an info stealer.</p> <p>The team also discovered a unique new PowerShell execution process related to the backdoor aimed at slipping past security-detection products, Frank wrote.</p>

“The PowerShell code runs in the context of a .NET application, thus not launching ‘powershell.exe’ which enables it to evade security products,” he wrote.

Overall, the new tools show Charming Kitten developing more “modular, multi-staged malware” with payload-delivery aimed at “both stealth and efficacy,” Frank noted. The group also is leaning heavily on open-source tools such as cryptography libraries, weaponizing them for payloads and communication encryption, he said.

This reliance on open-source tools demonstrates that the APT’s developers likely lack “specialization in any specific coding language” and possess “intermediate coding skills,” Frank observed.

The Memento Connection

Cybereason Nocturnus also found that another IP that US CERT has linked to Charming Kitten, 91.214.124[.]143, has been communicating with malicious files and has “unique URL directory patterns that reveal a potential connection to Memento ransomware,” Frank wrote.

“The string ‘gsdhdDdfgA5sS’ appears to be generated by the same script as the one listed in the [Memento ransomware IOCs](#) – “gadfTs55sghsSSS” – he explained, citing specific directory activity that researchers observed. “The domain ‘google.onedriver-srv[.]ml’ was previously resolved to the IP address 91.214.124[.]143 mentioned in the [US CERT](#) alert about Iran state-sponsored actors activity.”

Analyzing this directory activity points to the IP potentially serving as a domain being used as command and control (C2) for Memento, researchers found.

Indeed, this connection makes sense when noting that Charming Kitten’s activity last year to exploit the [ProxyShell vulnerability](#) – [an RCE flaw](#) in Microsoft Exchange servers that suffered a [barrage of attacks](#) – “took place in about the same time frame as Memento,” Frank observed.

“Iranian threat actors were also reported to be turning to ransomware during that period, which strengthens the hypothesis that Memento is operated by an Iranian threat actor,” he wrote.

Organizations on Alert

Charming Kitten’s continuous evolution of its capabilities has been [well-documented](#), so its new tools and potential to branch out in terms of the type of attacks it can deliver should come as little surprise.

Indeed, threat groups in general are just like any legitimate businesses in that they must bob and weave constantly to meet business objectives, especially when old tactics don’t serve them anymore or authorities are on to them, noted one security professional.

“Cybercriminals, like any business, work to evolve their software to improve, evolve and scale to bring about the best results needed to be successful,” observed James McQuiggan, security awareness advocate at KnowBe4, in an email to Threatpost.

In the same way, organizations need to constantly be on their toes and create “a strong security culture” so they aren’t caught unawares by novel tactics used by APTs like Charming Kitten and other highly organized threat groups, he said.

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HEADLINE	02/02 NKorea ongoing internet outages: hacker
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/north-korea-hacker-internet-outage/
GIST	FOR THE PAST two weeks, observers of North Korea's strange and tightly restricted corner of the internet began to notice that the country seemed to be dealing with some serious connectivity problems . On several different days, practically all of its websites—the notoriously isolated nation only has a few dozen—intermittently dropped offline en masse, from the booking site for its Air Koryo airline to Naenara, a page that serves as the official portal for dictator Kim Jong-un's government. At least one of

the central routers that allow access to the country's networks appeared at one point to be paralyzed, crippling the Hermit Kingdom's digital connections to the outside world.

Some North Korea watchers pointed out that the country had just [carried out a series of missile tests](#), implying that a foreign government's hackers might have launched a cyberattack against the rogue state to tell it to stop saber-rattling.

But responsibility for North Korea's ongoing internet outages doesn't lie with US Cyber Command or any other state-sponsored hacking agency. In fact, it was the work of one American man in a T-shirt, pajama pants, and slippers, sitting in his living room night after night, watching *Alien* movies and eating spicy corn snacks—and periodically walking over to his home office to check on the progress of the programs he was running to disrupt the internet of an entire country.

Just over a year ago, an independent hacker who goes by the handle P4x was himself hacked by North Korean spies. P4x was just one victim of [a hacking campaign that targeted Western security researchers](#) with the apparent aim of stealing their hacking tools and details about software vulnerabilities. He says he managed to prevent those hackers from swiping anything of value from him. But he nonetheless felt deeply unnerved by state-sponsored hackers targeting him personally—and by the lack of any visible response from the US government.

So after a year of letting his resentment simmer, P4x has taken matters into his own hands. “It felt like the right thing to do here. If they don’t see we have teeth, it’s just going to keep coming,” says the hacker. (P4x spoke to WIRED and shared screen recordings to verify his responsibility for the attacks but declined to use his real name for fear of prosecution or retaliation.) “I want them to understand that if you come at us, it means some of your infrastructure is going down for a while.”

P4x says he's found numerous known but unpatched vulnerabilities in North Korean systems that have allowed him to singlehandedly launch “denial-of-service” attacks on the servers and routers the country's few internet-connected networks depend on. For the most part, he declined to publicly reveal those vulnerabilities, which he argues would help the North Korean government defend against his attacks. But he named, as an example, a known bug in the web server software NginX that mishandles certain HTTP headers, allowing the servers that run the software to be overwhelmed and knocked offline. He also alluded to finding “ancient” versions of the web server software Apache, and says he's started to examine North Korea's own national homebrew operating system, known as Red Star OS, which he described as an old and likely vulnerable version of Linux.

P4x says he has largely automated his attacks on the North Korean systems, periodically running scripts that enumerate which systems remain online and then launching exploits to take them down. “For me, this is like the size of a small-to-medium pentest,” P4x says, using the abbreviation for a “penetration test,” the sort of whitehat hacking he's carried out in the past to reveal vulnerabilities in a client's network. “It's pretty interesting how easy it was to actually have some effect in there.”

Those relatively simple hacking methods have had immediate effects. Records from the uptime-measuring service Pingdom show that at several points during P4x's hacking, almost every North Korean website was down. (Some of those that stayed up, like the news site Uriminzokkiri.com, are based outside the country.) Junade Ali, a cybersecurity researcher who monitors the North Korean internet, says he began to observe what appeared to be mysterious, mass-scale attacks on the country's internet starting two weeks ago and has since closely tracked the attacks without having any idea who was carrying them out.

Ali says he saw key routers for the country go down at times, taking with them not only access to the country's websites but also to its email and any other internet-based services. “As their routers fail, it would literally then be impossible for data to be routed into North Korea,” Ali says, describing the result as “effectively a total internet outage affecting the country.” (P4x notes that while his attacks at times disrupted all websites hosted in the country and access from abroad to any other internet services hosted there, they didn’t cut off North Koreans’ outbound access to the rest of the internet.)

As rare as it may be for a single pseudonymous hacker to cause an internet blackout on that scale, it's far from clear what real effects the attacks have had on the North Korean government. Only a tiny fraction of North Koreans have access to internet-connected systems to begin with, says Martyn Williams, a researcher for the Stimson Center think tank's North Korea-focused 38 North Project. The vast majority of residents are confined to the country's disconnected intranet. Williams says the dozens of sites P4x has repeatedly taken down are largely used for propaganda and other functions aimed at an international audience.

While knocking out those sites no doubt presents a nuisance to some regime officials, Williams points out that the hackers who targeted P4x last year—like almost all the country's hackers—are almost certainly based in other countries, such as China. “I would say, if he's going after those people, he's probably directing his attentions to the wrong place,” says Williams. “But if he just wants to annoy North Korea, then he is probably being annoying.”

For his part, P4x says he would count annoying the regime as a success, and that the vast majority of the country's population that lacks internet access was never his target. “I definitely wanted to affect the people as little as possible and the government as much as possible,” P4x says.

He acknowledges that his attacks amount to no more than “tearing down government banners or defacing buildings,” as he puts it. But he also says that his hacking has so far focused on testing and probing to find vulnerabilities. He now intends to try actually hacking into North Korean systems, he says, to steal information and share it with experts. At the same time, he's hoping to recruit more hacktivists to his cause with a dark website he launched Monday called the FUNK Project—i.e. “FU North Korea”—in the hopes of generating more collective firepower.

“This is a project to keep North Korea honest,” the FUNK Project site reads. “You can make a difference as one person. The goal is to perform proportional attacks and information-gathering in order to keep NK from hacking the western world completely unchecked.”

P4x says his hacktivist efforts are meant to send a message not only to the North Korean government, but also his own. His cyberattacks on North Korean networks are, he says, in part an attempt to draw attention to what he sees as a lack of government response to North Korean targeting of US individuals. “If no one's going to help me, I'm going to help myself,” he says.

P4x knows the exact moment last year when he was hit by North Korea's spies. In late January of 2021, he opened a file sent to him by a fellow hacker, who had described it as an exploitation tool. Just 24 hours later, he spotted a [blog post from Google Threat Analysis Group](#) warning that [North Korean hackers were targeting security researchers](#). Sure enough, when P4x scrutinized the hacking tool he'd received from a stranger, he saw that it contained a backdoor designed to provide a remote foothold on his computer. P4x had opened the file in a virtual machine, digitally quarantining it from the rest of his system. But he was nonetheless shocked and appalled by the realization that he'd been personally targeted by North Korea.

P4x says he was later contacted by the FBI but was never offered any real help to assess the damage from North Korea's hacking or to protect himself in the future. Nor did he ever hear of any consequences for the hackers who targeted him, an open investigation into them, or even a formal recognition from a US agency that North Korea was responsible. It began to feel, as he put it, like “there's really nobody on our side.”

When WIRED asked the FBI about its response to the North Korean targeting of US security researchers, it responded in a statement: “As the lead agency responsible for threat response we rely on the public and private sector to report suspicious activity and intrusions, and work together to ensure we understand what's happening, prevent it from happening to others, and hold those responsible accountable,” the FBI statement reads. “The FBI is committed to pursuing the malicious actors and countries behind cyberattacks, and will not tolerate intellectual property theft or intimidation.”

After his experience as a target of state-sponsored cyberespionage, P4x spent much of the next year on other projects. But after a year had passed, still without public or private statements from the federal government about the targeting of security researchers and no offer of support from any US agency, P4x says he decided it was time to make his own statement to both the North Korean and American governments.

Other hackers targeted by North Korea don't all agree that P4x's hacking spree is the right way to make that statement. Dave Aitel, a former NSA hacker and the founder of security firm Immunity, was similarly targeted in the same espionage campaign. But he questions whether P4x has taken a productive approach to getting even, given that he may actually be getting in the way of stealthier intelligence efforts targeting the same North Korean computers.

"I would not want to disrupt real Western intelligence efforts that are already in place on those machines, assuming there is anything of value there," Aitel says.

Aitel agrees, though, that the government response to North Korea's campaign has been lacking. He says he never received any contact from a government agency and lays the blame for that silence specifically at the feet of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. "This is one of the biggest balls CISA, in particular, has dropped," Aitel says. "The United States is good at protecting the government, OK at protecting corporations, but does *not* protect individuals." He points out that many of the targeted security researchers likely had significant access to software vulnerabilities, enterprise networks, and the code of widely used tools. That could result, he says, in "the next SolarWinds."

When WIRED reached out to CISA, a spokesperson responded in a statement that the agency "is committed to supporting the cybersecurity community in detecting and protecting against malicious cyber actors," adding that "as part of this work, we encourage any researcher that is being targeted by cyber threats to contact the US government so we can provide all possible assistance."

US government criticisms aside, P4x is clear that his hacking aims primarily to send a message to the Kim regime, which he describes as carrying out "insane human rights abuses and complete control over their population." While he acknowledges that his attacks likely violate US computer fraud and hacking laws, he argues he hasn't done anything ethically wrong. "My conscience is clear," he says.

And what's the final goal of his cyberattacks on that totalitarian government's internet infrastructure? When will he end them?

"Regime change. No, I'm just kidding," P4x says with a laugh. "I just want to prove a point. I want that point to be very squarely proven before I stop."

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HEADLINE	02/02 FBI confirms obtaining Pegasus spyware
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/feb/02/fbi-confirms-it-obtained-nsos-pegasus-spyware
GIST	<p>The FBI has confirmed that it obtained NSO Group's powerful Pegasus spyware, suggesting that it bought access to the Israeli surveillance tool to "stay abreast of emerging technologies and tradecraft".</p> <p>In a statement released to the Guardian, the bureau said it had procured a "limited licence" to access Pegasus for "product testing and evaluation only", and suggested that its evaluation of the tool partly related to security concerns if the spyware fell into the "wrong hands".</p> <p>The bureau also claimed it had never used Pegasus in support of any FBI investigation. "There was no operational use in support of any investigation, the FBI procured a limited licence for product testing and evaluation only," it said.</p> <p>The statement marks a direct acknowledgment by the FBI that it acquired Pegasus, one of the world's most sophisticated hacking tools.</p>

The FBI's procurement of Pegasus, which occurred in 2019 under the Trump administration, was first reported by the New York Times.

It was a stunning revelation in part because the Biden administration has recently placed NSO on a commerce department blacklist, saying it had evidence that the company's hacking tools had enabled governments around the world to conduct "transnational repression", targeting dissidents and journalists.

The Guardian and other media organisations have reported multiple cases in which security researchers say governments have used NSO's tools to target American citizens around the world, including [Carine Kanimba](#), the daughter of the jailed Rwandan dissident Paul Rusesabagina, and [Lama Fakih](#), a senior staff member of Human Rights Watch in Beirut.

Once deployed, the user of Pegasus spyware can take complete control of a person's phone, accessing messages, intercepting phone calls and using the phone as a remote listening device.

A person with close knowledge of the FBI deal, who spoke to the Guardian on the condition of anonymity, claimed that it occurred after a "long process" of negotiations between US officials and NSO.

It is claimed one disagreement centred on how much control NSO would retain over its software. The source claimed that NSO usually kept sensors on its technology so that the company could be alerted in Israel if the technology was moved by a government client.

But the source claimed the FBI did not want the technology to be fitted with sensors that would have allowed NSO to track its physical location.

The source also claimed that the FBI did not want NSO's own engineers to install the technology and did not want to integrate the spyware into its own systems. Ultimately, it is understood that NSO and the FBI agreed to keep the technology in a large container. NSO did not respond to a request for comment on these claims.

The FBI was also concerned about possible "leakage" of any data to another foreign intelligence service, the source said.

The source claimed the Pegasus licence was acquired by the FBI using a financial "vehicle" that was not easily identified as being linked to the bureau.

The FBI did not respond to specific questions about its alleged concerns, the financial vehicle it used to procure the Pegasus licence, or other details.

In the end, the source claimed, the FBI did not actually use Pegasus. "They weren't using it at all. Like, not even switching it on. But they kept paying for it, and they wanted to renew. It was a one-year test project and it cost about \$5m [£3.7m], and they renewed for another \$4m," the source claimed. "But they didn't use it."

In an emailed statement in response to claims about the bureau's acquisition of Pegasus, the FBI said: "The FBI works diligently to stay abreast of emerging technologies and tradecraft – not just to explore a potential legal use but also to combat crime and to protect both the American people and our civil liberties.

"That means we routinely identify, evaluate, and test technical solutions and problems for a variety of reasons, including possible operational and security concerns they might pose in the wrong hands. There was no operational use in support of any investigation, the FBI procured a limited licence for product testing and evaluation only."

NSO has categorically denied that its Pegasus spyware can be used against US mobile phones.

Ron Wyden, a Democratic senator from Oregon, the chair of the finance committee and a staunch privacy advocate, said: "The public deserves far more transparency from the executive branch, including the FBI and justice department, about any US government relationships with NSO and other cyber-mercenaries. The public has a particular interest in whether the government believes the use of these tools against Americans is legal."

The New York Times reported that NSO brought a version of Pegasus to New Jersey in June 2019, after the FBI had reportedly been offered a workaround by NSO that allowed a product called Phantom to "hack any number in the United States". [Without naming sources](#), the New York Times reported that NSO conducted demonstrations of Phantom to the FBI, which the newspaper said resulted in an alleged "attack" against a US phone number.

In a lawsuit it filed in 2019, WhatsApp accused NSO of [sending malware to 1,400 of its users](#). The company has said about 100 of the individuals who were targeted were members of civil society, including journalists and activists. NSO has said in legal filings that even if WhatsApp's allegations were true, it was acting as a "foreign agent" when its spyware was deployed against WhatsApp users, because its software is used by foreign governments who are meant to use its spyware to fight crime.

NSO has also said it does not have information about how its clients use its spyware or who its clients target.

WhatsApp has also alleged in court filings that a US phone number was targeted by Pegasus on 9 May 2019. [Without providing evidence or sourcing](#), the New York Times reported that the alleged intrusion on a US number, as described in WhatsApp's legal case, was in fact a demonstration of NSO's technology to the FBI.

The FBI declined to comment on the allegation. NSO did not respond to a request for comment.

WhatsApp said: "In all circumstances our priority is to defend our services from threats that would harm people's ability to safely communicate with one another. We will continue our efforts to hold NSO accountable for their attacks against journalists, human rights activists and government officials in violation of US law. The spyware industry must be prevented from undermining the privacy and security of people in the US and across the world."

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/03 Military raid kills ISIS leader
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/03/world/syria-us-special-forces-raid-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>Washington (CNN)US Special Forces "successfully" conducted a counterterrorism mission in northwest Syria Wednesday evening killing ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, President Joe Biden announced Thursday morning.</p> <p>It was the biggest US raid in the country since the 2019 operation that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.</p> <p>Sources on the ground reported multiple fatalities. At least 13 people were killed in clashes that took place during and after the raid -- including six children and four women -- according to the Syrian civil defense group, the White Helmets. There were no US casualties, according to the Pentagon.</p> <p>Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in a statement late Wednesday night that the mission was conducted by US Central Command, which controls military operations and activities in the Middle East.</p> <p>"More information will be provided as it becomes available," the statement said.</p>

The three-sentence Pentagon statement did not disclose a target for the special operations mission or whether there was any indication of civilian casualties. But witnesses and rescue workers told CNN that shelling and explosions preceded an airdrop of US forces shortly after midnight and targeted a house in the Syrian-Turkish border area of Atmeh, in the rebel enclave of Idlib.

The US has repeatedly targeted al Qaeda and its affiliates in northwest Syria, with the Pentagon acknowledging at least one strike in recent months may have resulted in civilian casualties. But Wednesday's operation was the largest in scale since a two-hour raid killed ISIS leader Baghdadi in northwest Syria in October 2019.

Last September, the military targeted a senior al Qaeda leader near Idlib, Syria, according to a statement from Central Command. One month later, the military carried out a drone strike against Abdul Hamid al-Matar, a senior al Qaeda leader, Central Command said.

And then in December, the military targeted Musab Kinan, a senior leader of al Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din, near Idlib. Central Command opened an investigation into the possibility of civilian casualties from the strike, but the Pentagon was unable to provide updates at the time.

Meanwhile, various parts of Syria and Iraq have seen an ISIS resurgence. Last month, over 100 ISIS fighters attacked a prison in Syria's northeast in an attempt to free jailed members of the extremist group. At least 200 prison inmates and 30 security forces died in the clashes that followed the thwarted jail break.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Judge reduces Calif. teen terror sentence
SOURCE	https://www.dailycal.org/2022/02/02/former-berkeley-high-student-charged-with-terrorism-to-be-released/
GIST	<p>A federal appeals judge ruled last week that Amer Alhaggagi, a Berkeley High School graduate who was sentenced to 15 years in high-security prison for providing material support to ISIS in 2019, would be receiving a reduced sentence.</p> <p>According to judicial documents, Alhaggagi had developed a fascination with ISIS on the internet, and caught the attention of federal law enforcement after posting online about killing 10,000 people across the Bay Area by setting off bombs in San Francisco nightclubs and UC Berkeley dorms, setting fire to the Berkeley Hills and distributing cocaine laced with strychnine on Halloween.</p> <p>“His persona allegedly had associates in Mexican cartels who could get him grenades, bazookas, and RPGs, offered to join a user in Brazil to attack the Olympics,” the documents state. “(Alhaggagi) was considering conducting attacks in Dubai.”</p> <p>But it was not this that got Alhaggagi arrested. Alhaggagi was arrested after he started a Twitter account for a member of ISIS, said Alhaggagi’s lawyer, August Gugelmann. Alhaggagi pleaded guilty to providing “material support” for a terrorist group.</p> <p>However, Gugelmann argued that Alhaggagi was less a homegrown terrorist than a perennial prankster. “He was a real troll,” Gugelmann said. “He liked pushing people’s buttons and trying to see if he could get a reaction out of people. But when it looked like this was the real deal, he ran away, he didn’t want any part of it.”</p> <p>As part of both ISIS-sympathetic Sunni groups and anti-ISIS Shiite groups, Alhaggagi would “troll” users, claiming that certain users were Shiite if he were in a Sunni chat room, or Sunni if he were in a Shiite chat room, in an attempt to get other users to block them, according to the legal documents and Gugelmann. Through these channels, he came in contact with ISIS members. Alhaggagi was arrested in November of 2016.</p>

	<p>District Judge Charles Breyer found that the so-called “terrorism enhancement,” which greatly increases sentences in cases of terrorism, applied to this case. Alhaggagi was sentenced to more than 15 years despite never committing any acts of violence, Gugelmann said.</p> <p>Alhaggagi was sent to a high-security prison, and his lawyers appealed. The 9th Circuit Court found that the enhancement did not apply, and his sentence was subsequently reduced from several years to a few months, according to Gugelmann.</p> <p>“Two hundred people showed up at his sentencing to show support for him because the community understood that he was not the person that the government was saying he was,” Gugelmann said. “He was not any kind of terrorist, nor did he want to be. He was an immature kid who did really reckless stuff.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Still in detention because of former ISIS ties
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/02/thousands-men-women-children-remain-detention-because-their-former-ties-isis/
GIST	<p>The Islamic State’s assault on the Gweiran prison in northeastern Syria last week was a disturbing reminder that prisons and camps across Syria and Iraq continue to hold an estimated 43,000 foreign men, women and children once associated with the group better known as ISIS. Audio of the assault, narrated by an injured 17-year-old Australian, described an Islamic State attack that resulted in multiple child casualties.</p> <p>The attacks signal a potential Islamic State resurgence — and prompted the largest U.S. military response since 2019. To foreign governments, the potential return of their citizens back into the ranks of the Islamic State represents a clear threat, potentially reinvigorating an extremist campaign once declared defeated.</p> <p>The repatriation and reintegration of foreign fighters and their families is a complicated and contentious issue. While governments have several legal means to address what happens to male foreign fighters, often they lack the tools to process or help women and minors who did not take up front-line positions. Consequently, many countries remain reluctant to bring back citizens who traveled to join foreign conflicts.</p> <p>However, research-based analysis suggests that repatriating foreign detainees to their home countries mitigates the risk of detained individuals returning to the Islamic State. And human rights groups point out that while some detained foreign people traveled freely, others were trafficked.</p> <p>The international community has no cohesive plan to deal with long-running repatriation issues, in part because of persistent knowledge gaps about foreign terrorist fighters who travel with their families, and the implications for noncombatant repatriation and rehabilitation. Our research identified four critical blind spots that leave many Islamic State-affiliated families in limbo.</p> <p>Why are there imprisoned families and minors?</p> <p>The large number of minors held in prisons and detention camps in Syria and Iraq raises the question, “Who is a foreign fighter?” Unlike in foreign fighter conflicts of the past, the Islamic State recruited men, women and children in various roles to help legitimize the group’s governance ambitions. The foreign individuals detained in these facilities include recruits with roles on and off the battlefield.</p> <p>Families have played an important part in the Islamic State campaign. Some individuals traveled with their families to join the fight, while in other cases families were formed in conflict zones. For example, a 2019 report estimates that women and minors made up 36 to 42 percent of those who traveled to join the Islamic State from western Europe, and 46 to 54 percent of travelers from Eastern Europe.</p> <p>The Program on Extremism at George Washington University identified at least 14 adult women and an estimated 12 to 30 minors who traveled from the United States to Syria and Iraq.</p>

Women recruited by the Islamic State face an uncertain future

Gendered biases have also clouded policymakers' understanding of the issue. The Islamic State actively recruited [women into its ranks](#). While many women who traveled to join the group had the freedom to do so, once in-theater their choices were severely restricted by harsh Islamic State [gender segregation policies](#) that limited the ability of women to carry out even the most menial tasks without a male escort.

Although news reports have reductively described women's roles as "[jihadi brides](#)," women had [diverse experiences under Islamic State rule](#). Some were married to Islamic State members, while others worked as doctors or teachers. In some cases, women served as part of the domestic security forces, or had limited participation in conventional [military training](#), and later, [operations](#). Adequately addressing questions surrounding repatriation and reintegration, we argue, requires a nuanced understanding of women's experiences in the Islamic State campaign.

How do foreign fighters — and families — return home?

The means by which Islamic State foreign fighters and families return to their home countries varies across formal and informal pathways — a process often complicated by gender, age, timing and country of origin. Public policy has emphasized the formal repatriation aspects. The U.S. government, for example, has recently [taken the lead](#) in encouraging the world's nations to bring their detained fighters back home, [at least in theory](#).

Over the past few years, the U.S. approach has led to the formal repatriation of [12 adults and 16 children](#) from Syria and Iraq, as of December 2021. However, the Program on Extremism also identified a further 15 individuals who returned to the United States through their own accord. This brings the total of publicly known [U.S. returnees to 44](#), including 22 adults (18 men and four women) and 22 individuals who were born abroad or were minors when their parents traveled to join the Islamic State. The scope of the issue — i.e., the number of returnees in the United States and other countries — may be larger than initially anticipated. And the range of pathways of return may prompt a closer look at nuanced tools of [reintegration and rehabilitation](#).

What are the consequences of indefinite detention?

Since 2019, [thousands of foreign fighters and their families](#), including approximately 27,000 children, have remained in indefinite detention in Syria and Iraq. U.N. reports note a generation of youth is growing up in detention camps with [dire health conditions and political instability](#). Nearly three years after the territorial collapse of the Islamic State, individuals who were brought by parents to Syria and Iraq as minors are now coming of legal age.

Moreover, as last week's prison assault suggests, [young male minors](#) have been held alongside adult men in prison facilities. Administrators moved these minors, some as young as 12, to prisons after arbitrarily deeming them [too old to be held in detention camps](#) alongside women and young children. Recent Islamic State actions offer a harrowing reminder of the consequences of indefinite detention with no cohesive international plan of action.

Progress toward addressing long-running repatriation issues is hampered by the four blind spots described here. The continued reluctance of governments to address the situation for families and minors, along with issues related to women's diverse participation in the Islamic State conflict, the formal and informal pathways for return, and the continued hesitancy to address the indefinite detention of foreign fighters and their families exacerbates humanitarian and security challenges. This increases the risk of a worst-case scenario — the return of foreign families into Islamic State ranks, and the possibility of a reinvigorated Islamic State campaign.

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HEADLINE	02/03 UN: Boko Haram recruited 8,000 children
SOURCE	https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/02/03/unodc-boko-haram-has-recruited-about-8000-children-in-war-against-nigeria-2/

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has disclosed that about 8,000 children had been recruited in fighting war against Nigeria since the start of the Boko Haram crisis in the North East in 2009.

The UN agency, while calling for a step-up of effort to protect child victims and witnesses in terrorism-related proceedings in Nigeria, said reports had shown that some boys and girls were increasingly being used as human shields and to detonate bombs.

A statement yesterday said: “According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) report from the Handbook of children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups, since 2009, about 8,000 children have been recruited and used by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

“Some boys have been forced to attack their own families to demonstrate loyalty to Boko Haram, while girls have been forced to marry, clean, cook and carry equipment and weapons.”

The statement added that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) received consistent reports that some boys and girls were increasingly being used as human shields and to detonate bombs, citing that in May 2015, for example, a girl about 12 years old, was used to detonate a bomb at a bus station in Damaturu, Yobe State, killing seven people. Similar incidents were reported in Cameroon and Niger Republic.

The statement further said the recently released propaganda video by ISWAP, showing children being taught military skills to train them for fighting and the latest attack on the Chibok community in Borno State by ISWAP are a reminder of the importance to step up the efforts aimed to protect children from terrorist groups.

The statement revealed that UNODC, working closely with national counterparts, have recently started to provide support aimed at preventing and responding to violence against children by terrorist and violent extremist groups, under a new European funded project called “STRIVE Juvenile.”

Project Manager of STRIVE Juvenile, Bianca Kopp, said UNODC acknowledged during the opening of a recent capacity building workshop that, “We have all sadly become familiar – unfortunately – with the phenomenon of child recruitment and exploitation by terrorist groups.

“Indeed, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls was probably the first event that brought global attention to the brutality of these groups towards children and, even more crucially, it showed how children play a key role in their criminal tactics.

“Thousands of children have since then been recruited, exploited as servants, cooks, spies, in hostilities, and even used to carry out suicide attacks. When these children exit the groups, they have experienced prolonged violence, their bonds to the communities have been severed, and their personal development has been warped. As thousands of people, including children, are currently leaving the ranks of the groups to rejoin society, the urgency of appropriate responses increases.”

The statement quoted Doctor Ifeakandu, from the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Nigeria, to have said: “Terrorism remains one of the most potent challenges to Nigeria,” adding that, “Children are disproportionately affected by it and we need to find responses in line with their best interests.”

Acknowledging the primary responsibility of state authorities to support the children’s trajectories of rehabilitation and reintegration, and to that end, require specialised training to respond to the complex needs of these children and address the victimisation that they have experienced, Rear Admiral Yem Musa, from the Office of the National Security Adviser, emphasised that, “Investment in rehabilitation and peace, especially, as it concerns our children, is essential to end the cycle of violence that is generated and exploited by the terrorists and violent extremists.”

This was also echoed by the representative of the European Union, Mr. Jerome Rivière, when he stressed that the STRIVE Juvenile project “recognises the importance of children’s role as agents of peace and in

	<p>their potential to transform societal dynamics. When children and families do not feel safe, counterterrorism cannot work.”</p> <p>The recent workshop held in Abuja allowed Nigerian and international experts from the security sector, the justice system, and the child protection sector to discuss national context and practices, strategies for child sensitive and trauma informed interaction with children, as well as means of protection of these children throughout the justice process.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Reports: US Syria raid civilian casualties
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/us-raid-syria.html
GIST	<p>U.S. Special Operations forces carried out what the Pentagon called a “successful” counterterrorism mission in northwest Syria early Thursday. But the risky commando assault against what was believed to be a Qaeda leader came amid reports from the scene that several civilians, including children, may have been killed or injured.</p> <p>American helicopters ferried the commandos into position soon after midnight, surrounding a house in Atmeh, a town close to the border with Turkey in rebel-held Idlib Province, according to American analysts monitoring Syrian social media reports and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.</p> <p>A long, tense standoff ensued, with helicopter loudspeakers blaring warnings in Arabic for women and children inside the house to evacuate, according to social media and witness accounts. After about two hours, a major battle erupted, with rocket-propelled grenades and other fire hurtling from the house and surrounding buildings toward the Americans.</p> <p>During the operation, one of the American helicopters suffered a mechanical problem, was forced to land and was later destroyed by American attack aircraft. At some point, the American commandos and their remaining helicopters flew off, witnesses said.</p> <p>Shortly after midnight on Thursday in Washington, John F. Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, issued a terse statement: “U.S. Special Operations forces under the control of U.S. Central Command conducted a counterterrorism mission this evening in northwest Syria. The mission was successful. There were no U.S. casualties. More information will be provided as it becomes available.”</p> <p>Video from the scene on social media showed people pulling bodies of at least nine men, women and children from the rubble of the badly damaged house, said Charles Lister, the director of the Washington-based Middle East Institute’s Syria and Countering Terrorism and Extremism Programs, who was monitoring the videos and aircraft-tracking websites.</p> <p>Witnesses suggested that American counterfire against the house caused the damage, but a senior American military official said there was an explosion inside the house that was not caused by U.S. firepower, and more likely by the target of the raid blowing himself up.</p> <p>The size, scope and duration of the battle suggested that the target of the raid was likely a senior Qaeda figure, Mr. Lister said. The fact that the United States risked sending in commandos, and not just launching airstrikes, also suggested the focus of the raid was a senior figure.</p> <p>American officials declined to identify what one called a “high-value” target, pending a DNA analysis, but said the administration could make an announcement as early as Thursday. The officials refused to comment on whether it was a senior regional Qaeda leader, or even the terrorist group’s top leader himself, Ayman al-Zawahri, who is believed to be in the rugged border areas straddling Afghanistan and Pakistan.</p> <p>The White House was abuzz on Wednesday night about something secretive afoot, and Pentagon officials were unusually tight-lipped about the mission’s details.</p>

Indeed, the helicopter-borne commando assault bore a resemblance to the raid in October 2019 that culminated in the death of [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), the leader of the Islamic State. That raid took place not far from the one on Thursday.

Mr. Lister said that the Atmeh area has crowded camps that Qaeda members use to hide among people displaced by the conflict.

Idlib Province is home to many violent Islamic extremist groups, dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly the Nusra Front, which was formerly linked to Al Qaeda. Syrian military forces, backed by Iranian and Russian firepower, have targeted the group. Another prominent group is Hurras al-Din, a Qaeda affiliate.

Hurras al-Din emerged in early 2018 after several factions broke away from the Nusra Front, which at least publicly has since distanced itself from Al Qaeda's overall leadership. Hurras al-Din is the successor to the Khorasan Group, a small but dangerous organization of hardened senior Qaeda operatives that Mr. Zawahri sent to Syria to plot attacks against the West.

The province has been the scene of American airstrikes in recent months, but the pace of activity there has been far short of the American-led coalition's attacks against remnants of the Islamic State in northeastern Syria.

In early December, an American MQ-9 Reaper drone carried out a strike against a suspected senior Qaeda leader and planner in Idlib. But the initial review of the attack indicated that the drone's missile struck both the Qaeda leader on a motorcycle and a Syrian family in a car close to the motorcycle.

The Qaeda leader was killed; members of the Syrian family were injured.

The military's Central Command opened an investigation into the incident, the results of which have not yet been made public.

"We abhor the loss of innocent life and take all possible measures to prevent them," Capt. Bill Urban, the chief spokesman for Central Command, said at the time. "The possibility of a civilian casualty was immediately self-reported to U.S. Central Command. We are initiating a full investigation of the allegations and will release the results when appropriate."

Two months before that, in October, an MQ-9 carried out an airstrike in northwest Syria that [military officials said](#) killed a senior Qaeda leader, Abdul Hamid al-Matar.

And on Sept. 20, an American airstrike near Idlib killed a Qaeda leader, Salim Abu Ahmad, U.S. military officials said.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Pentagon: counterterrorism mission Syria
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-military-carries-counterterrorism-mission-northwest-syria/story?id=82638736
GIST	<p>The Pentagon has confirmed that U.S. special operations forces carried out a "successful" counterterrorism mission in northwest Syria Wednesday, but provided few other details.</p> <p>"U.S. Special Operations forces under the control of U.S. Central Command conducted a counterterrorism mission this evening in northwest Syria. The mission was successful. There were no U.S. casualties," said John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, in a statement. "More information will be provided as it becomes available."</p> <p>One of the helicopters used in the mission experienced a mechanical problem and then had to be blown up on the ground by U.S. forces, according to a U.S. official.</p>

	<p>No details were provided on who was the target of the counterterrorism mission or whether it involved ground troops and helicopters as was claimed in a flurry of social media reports emerging from Syria on Wednesday night.</p> <p>Those social media posts reported possible U.S. military activity in Idlib province, a town in far western Syria, close to the border with Turkey. Some posts included videos that seemed to show night scenes where the sounds of gunfire and low-flying helicopters could be heard near the towns of Atimah and Dar Ballout.</p> <p>The approximately 1,000 U.S. military troops in Syria operate in eastern Syria supporting the mission against ISIS.</p> <p>American troops do not operate in government-controlled areas in northwestern Syria, especially in Idlib province, which was an extremist safe haven for much of the last decade. But they have sporadically carried out counterterrorism missions in Idlib, targeting various Islamic extremist groups with drone strikes.</p> <p>The highest profile mission was a ground raid that killed ISIS' top leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who was hiding out in a house close to the border with Turkey, on Oct. 27, 2019.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Afghans flee as the economy collapses
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/world/asia/afghanistan-migration-refugees.html
GIST	<p>ZARANJ, Afghanistan — From their hide-out in the desert ravine, the migrants could just make out the white lights of the Iranian border glaring over the horizon.</p> <p>The air was cold and their breath heavy. Many had spent the last of their savings on food weeks before and cobbled together cash from relatives, hoping to escape Afghanistan's economic collapse. Now, looking at the border they saw a lifeline: work, money, food to eat.</p> <p>"There is no other option for me, I cannot go back," said Najaf Akhlaqi, 26, staring at the smugglers scouring the moonlit landscape for Taliban patrols. Then he jolted to his feet as the smugglers barked at the group to run.</p> <p>Since the United States withdrew troops and the Taliban seized power, Afghanistan has plunged into an economic crisis that has pushed millions already living hand-to-mouth over the edge. Incomes have vanished, life-threatening hunger has become widespread and badly needed aid has been stymied by Western sanctions against Taliban officials.</p> <p>More than half of the population is facing "extreme levels" of hunger, António Guterres, United Nations secretary-general, said last month. "For Afghans, daily life has become a frozen hell," he added.</p> <p>Now with no immediate respite in sight, hundreds of thousands of people have fled to neighboring countries.</p> <p>From October through the end of January, more than a million Afghans in southwestern Afghanistan alone have set off down one of two major migration routes into Iran, according to migration researchers. Aid organizations estimate that around 4,000 to 5,000 people are crossing into Iran each day.</p> <p>Though many are choosing to leave because of the immediate economic crisis, the prospect of long-term Taliban governance — including restrictions on women and fears of retribution — has only added to their urgency.</p>

“There’s an exponential increase in the number of people departing Afghanistan through this route, particularly given how challenging this journey is in the winter months,” said David Mansfield, a researcher tracking Afghan migration. By his estimates, up to four times as many Afghans were leaving Afghanistan for Pakistan and then Iran each day in January compared with the same time last year.

The exodus has raised alarms across the region and in Europe, where politicians fear a repeat of the 2015 migrant crisis, when more than a million people, mostly Syrians, sought asylum in Europe, setting off a populist backlash. Many fear that this spring as temperatures rise and the snow-covered routes become easier to traverse, a deluge of Afghans could arrive at the European Union’s borders.

Determined to contain migrants in the region, the [European Union last fall pledged over \\$1 billion](#) in humanitarian aid for Afghanistan and neighboring countries hosting Afghans who have fled.

“We need new agreements and commitments in place to be able to assist and help an extremely vulnerable civil population,” Jonas Gahr Store, the Norwegian prime minister, said [in a statement](#) at the U.N. Security Council’s meeting on Afghanistan last month. “We must do what we can to avoid another migration crisis and another source of instability in the region and beyond.”

But Western donors are still wrestling with complicated questions over how to meet their humanitarian obligations to ordinary Afghans without propping up the new Taliban government.

In recent months, Taliban officials have appealed to Western officials to release their chokehold on the economy, making some promises around education for girls and other conditions set by the international community for aid. [As the humanitarian situation worsened](#), the United States also issued some exemptions to sanctions and committed \$308 million in aid last month — bringing the total U.S. assistance to the country to \$782 million since October last year.

But aid can only go so far in a country facing economic collapse, experts say. Unless Western donors move more quickly to release their chokehold on the economy and revive the financial system, Afghans desperate for work will likely continue to look abroad.

Crouching among the migrant group in the desert, Mr. Akhlaqi steeled himself for the desperate dash ahead: A mile-long scramble over churned-earth trenches, a 15-foot-high border wall topped with barbed wire and a vast stretch of scrubland flush with Iranian security forces. Over the past month, he had crossed the border 19 times, he said. Each time, he was arrested and returned over the border.

A police officer under the former government, Mr. Akhlaqi went into hiding in relatives’ homes for fear of Taliban retribution. As the little savings that fed his family ran dry, he moved from city to city looking for a new job. But the work was scarce. So in early November, he linked up with smugglers in Nimruz Province determined to get to Iran.

“I’m afraid of the Iranian border guards,” he lamented. Still, he said, “I can’t stay here.”

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghans accounted for the second highest number of [asylum claims](#) in Europe, after Syria, and one of the world’s largest populations of [refugees](#) and asylum seekers — [around 3 million](#) people — most of whom live in Iran and Pakistan.

Many fled through Nimruz, a remote corner of southwest Afghanistan wedged between the borders of Iran and Pakistan that has served as a smuggling haven for decades. In its capital, Zaranj, Afghans from around the country crowd into smuggler-run hotels that line the main road and gather around street vendors’ kebab stands, exchanging stories about the grueling journey ahead.

At a parking lot at the center of town known as “The Terminal,” men pile into the backs of pickup trucks bound for Pakistan while young boys hawk goggles and water bottles. On a recent day, their sales pitches — “Who wants water?” — were nearly smothered by the sounds of honking cars and the angry shouts of haggling men exchanging tattered Afghani bank notes for Iranian toman.

Standing in line to climb into the back of a pickup, Abdul, 25, had arrived the day before from Kunduz, a commercial hub in northern Afghanistan that was wracked with fighting last summer during the Taliban's blitz offensive. As the thuds of mortar fire engulfed the city, his business sputtered to a halt. After the takeover, his shop stood empty as people saved the little money they had for basics like food and medicine.

As the months dragged on, Abdul borrowed money to feed his own family, plunging further and further into debt. Finally, he decided leaving for Iran was his only option.

"I don't want to leave my country, but I have no other choice," said Abdul, who asked that The Times use only his first name, fearing that his family could face retaliation. "If the economic situation continues like this, there will be no future here."

As the economic crisis has worsened, local Taliban officials have sought to profit off the exodus by regulating the lucrative smuggling business. At the Terminal, a Taliban official sitting in a small silver car collects a new tax — 1,000 Afghanis, or about \$10 — from each car heading to Pakistan.

At first, Taliban officials also taxed the city's other main migrant route, a smuggler-escorted journey across the desert and over the border wall directly into Iran. But after accusations in September that a smuggler had raped a girl, the Taliban reversed course, cracking down on this desert route.

Still, such efforts have done little to deter smugglers.

Speeding through a desert road around midnight, one smuggler, S., who preferred to go by only his first initial because of the illegal nature of his work, blasted Arabic pop music from his stereo. A music video with a woman swaying in a tight black dress played on the car's navigation screen. As he neared his safe house, he cut the back lights to avoid being followed.

Moving people each night requires a delicate dance: First, he strikes a deal with a low-ranking Iranian border guard to allow a certain number of migrants to cross. Then, he tells other smugglers to bring migrants from their hotel to a safe house in the desert and coordinates with his business partner to meet the group on the other side of the border. Once the sun sets, he and others drive for hours, scoping the area for Taliban patrols and — once the route is clear — take the migrants from the safe house to the border.

"We don't have a home, our home is our car, all night driving near to the border — one day my wife will kick me out of home," S. said, erupting in laughter.

Crossing the border is just the first hurdle that Afghans must overcome. Since the takeover, both Pakistan and Iran have stepped up deportations, warning that their fragile economies cannot handle an influx of migrants and refugees.

In the last five months of 2021, more than 500,000 who entered these countries illegally were either deported or voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, likely fearing deportation, according to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

Sitting on the ragged blue carpet of one hotel was Negar, 35, who goes by only one name. She had climbed over the border wall into Iran with her six children two nights before desperate to start a new life in Iran. For months, she had stretched out her family's meager savings, buying little more than bread and firewood to survive. When that cash ran out, she sold her only goat to make the journey here.

But once she touched Iranian soil, a pack of border guards descended on the group of migrants and fired shots into the pre-dawn darkness. Lying on the ground, Negar called out to her children and had a horrifying realization: Her two youngest sons were missing.

	After two agonizing days, smugglers in Iran found her sons and sent them back to her in Zaranj. But shaken by losing them, she was at a loss over whether to attempt to cross again.
	“I’m worried,” she said. “What if I can never make it to Iran?”
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/02 Idaho road deaths surge; biggest spike US
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/idaho-road-deaths-surge/293-12d85730-d82a-4620-9ff9-8c5bcc440237
GIST	<p>COEUR D'ALENE, Idaho — Traffic deaths in Idaho surged in the first nine months of 2021, as did nationwide road deaths, according to new data from the U.S. Department of Transportation, as reported by our news partner, Coeur d'Alene Press.</p> <p>The estimated number of people who died in motor vehicle crashes from January to September 2021 is 31,720. The figure is 12% higher than the same period in 2020.</p> <p>That’s the highest number of fatalities over a nine-month period since 2006.</p> <p>It’s also the highest increase since the department began recording fatal crash data in 1975.</p> <p>In Idaho, a total of 206 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the first nine months of 2021.</p> <p>That 36% increase over the same period in 2020 is the biggest spike in the nation.</p> <p>Fatalities had declined in Idaho each year between 2016 and 2020.</p> <p>During that four-year period, 36% of all fatal crashes in Idaho were linked to impaired driving, according to the Idaho Transportation Department.</p> <p>The number of fatalities in Idaho rose to a 15-year high in 2021, with at least 258 people dead as a result of crashes.</p> <p>The next highest increases between 2020 and 2021 were in Nevada and Oregon, where deaths rose by 30% and 29% respectively.</p> <p>Washington’s traffic fatalities totaled 467 in 2021, a 10% increase from the year before. In Montana, fatalities increased 18.5%, with 179 deaths recorded.</p> <p>Region 10 — which includes Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana — had the highest increase in fatalities overall, with deaths rising 20% in the region.</p> <p>Fatalities dropped in 10 states and the District of Columbia.</p> <p>Mississippi and Wisconsin were the only states that saw no change.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Reno dry Jan. breaks 130yr-old record
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/02/reno-nevada-rain-january-drought
GIST	Reno, Nevada , hasn’t recorded a single drop of rain during the entire month of January, a record that goes back nearly 130 years.

The city, tucked on the Nevada-California border, has borne the brunt of weather extremes in recent months.

Reno experienced its wettest October on record last year, according to the National Weather Service, after an annual amount of rain fell [on northern Nevada in just two days](#). Close to 3 in of rain was recorded at Reno-Tahoe international airport during that storm, ranking the third highest of any month since 1893.

This month's lack of precipitation, on the other extreme, beat out a record from January 1966 when [less than 0.01 of an inch was measured](#) during the month.

"We've had whiplash from wet to dry," Dan McEvoy, regional climatologist at the Western Regional Climate Center [told](#) the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Reno doesn't stand alone. Across the American west, a region that's been mired in drought, autumn rains wreaked havoc. The city of Los Angeles broke a rainfall record set in 1936 and officials had to rescue residents and vehicles out of the surging Los Angeles River. Areas of Arizona received up to 400% of average precipitation during its 2021 monsoon season. Rain [poured on the parched Pacific north-west](#) in November causing floods and flows. Creeks that been reduced to a trickle in the preceding months overran their banks in northern California while record [snowfall measured 214 in in the central Sierra](#) as December came to a close.

The super-storms were enough to recharge some dwindling reservoirs, bringing huge swaths of the west out of the exceptional drought classification. The state of California finally escaped the worst drought categories (as deemed by the US Drought Monitor) [at the end of January](#). But even with the deluge, the region is now bracing for yet another prolonged [period without precipitation](#).

Along with Reno's record, other cities across the west broke dryness records, including Las Vegas and Sacramento.

"Much of the region has experienced alternating periods of wet and dry weather since the water year began on October 1, 2021," wrote Brad Rippey, a meteorologist with the US Department of Agriculture in the latest [US Drought Monitor summary](#) for the west last week.

Variability isn't exactly unheard of in the west, where conditions often change between the seasons – but heat has shifted the stakes.

A warming trend, driven by climate change, has quickened the pace of drying between storms and exacerbated issues when rain and snow doesn't show up during the typically wet winter months.

"We really depend on that snowpack sitting up in the mountains moving into the summer months," said David Simeral, a climatologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, adding that spiking temperatures were causing the "snowpack to melt out prematurely – and that causes problems". Forecasts show that February isn't likely to offer much of a reprieve.

"Extremely dry conditions – with zero rain or snow in most spots – are likely to continue across all of California and indeed much of the west into mid-February," climate scientist Daniel Swain wrote on Twitter at the end of January. "Temperatures will also warm to above average levels, increasing mid-winter snowmelt in mountains."

Swain also noted that January 2022 was the driest on record for data going back 40 years across parts of the west. "It's not impossible there could be a late February or March comeback – it has happened before," he said. "But unfortunately the current trend is pretty vividly illustrating why I was so frustrated with folks claiming that the drought was functionally over after a very wet October and December 2021."

Also this week, officials announced that California's crucial snowpack is melting quickly. Ending last year at roughly 160% of average, it's plummeted to below average with weeks of dryness ahead. Across the

state, the snowpack came in at 92% of average according to the California department of water resources, which released results of their snow survey on 1 February.

“We are definitely still in a drought. A completely dry January shows how quickly surpluses can disappear,” said Karla Nemeth, DWR director, in a statement. “The variability of California weather proves that nothing is guaranteed and further emphasizes the need to conserve and continue preparing for a possible third dry year.”

In Reno, the last notable amount of precipitation was a small snow event that occurred on 29 December, and forecasts show February isn’t likely to offer much of a reprieve.

“There is essentially a zero chance we will see anything for the next 10-12 days” officials at the National Weather Service in Reno wrote on Wednesday about the forecast for rain and snow. They added that there was only a 35% chance that the greater Reno area will see any measurable precipitation through 17 February. “That’s not super hopeful for the first half of February which tends to be a solid month of precipitation. We shall look towards the second half of February and March for redemption.”

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HEADLINE	02/02 NIH experiment: inject cocaine into puppies
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/2/nih-experiment-injected-beagle-puppies-cocaine-seal/
GIST	<p>The National Institutes of Health has tested an experimental treatment for cocaine addicts by injecting the drug into beagle puppies.</p> <p>The “coke hounds” were revealed by the White Coat Waste Project, which discovered details of the \$2 million taxpayer-funded experiment lurking in documents disclosed under an open-records request that the group filed.</p> <p>Six-month-old beagle puppies were outfitted with jackets that injected them with drugs, along with an experimental drug that was fed to them. The dogs were “dosed with cocaine again and again and again for months,” the Waste Project said in its write-up of the experiment.</p> <p>Researchers filmed the dogs to try to spot any signs of adverse reactions between the drugs. They also operated on the dogs to have a “telemetry unit” implanted to monitor their vital signs.</p> <p>The dogs were either euthanized or “recycled” for other experiments at the end of the cocaine tests, the Waste Project said.</p> <p>“Taxpayers should not be forced to foot the multimillion-dollar bill for wasteful and cruel ‘Coke Hound’ experiments in which beagle puppies are injected with cocaine just to fulfill burdensome and outdated FDA red tape,” said Devin Murphy, communications manager at the Waste Project, which works to stop taxpayer-funded research on animals.</p> <p>The group said the experiment was conducted twice, once from November 2020 to April 2021 and again from May to September last year.</p> <p>SRI International, a California-based research firm, led the experiment. The company did not respond to multiple requests for comment.</p> <p>The National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of NIH, which funded the research, said the goal is to find treatments for cocaine disorder.</p> <p>Although opioids get the most attention, the institute said, nearly 20,000 of the overdose deaths in 2020 involved cocaine. The Food and Drug Administration has not approved any treatment for stimulus disorders, and the experiments are part of an attempt to close that gap.</p>

“Through this particular NIDA contract, researchers performed toxicology studies in a preclinical model to test the safety of a novel drug for the treatment of cocaine use disorder before moving it into a human study. This is done for the sole purpose of ensuring that a new medication will be safe in people who are seeking treatment for cocaine use disorder, and who may resume cocaine use while in treatment,” the institute said.

The folks at the White Coat Waste Project said there are alternatives to using dogs for testing to get FDA approval, but “institutional inertia” means researchers continue to reach for puppies when they don’t have to.

White Coat says most drugs tested on animals are denied approval anyway.

Advocates for animal testing say it’s an important part of the research chain and weed out many drugs, making eventual trials on humans safer.

NIH polices animal testing conducted under its auspices and says it tries to reduce the need to use them.

Applications that propose using animals face a “rigorous review process,” NIDA said.

“Reviewers examine the justification for using animals in each study, whether the research goals can be accomplished using an alternative model, and interventions to minimize pain and distress,” the institute said.

Results of the cocaine-drug interaction are not clear. The documents obtained by the Waste Project say a report may be submitted to NIDA later this year.

Some details of the testing were redacted from the records provided to the Waste Project. Federal officials said it would divulge proprietary information.

Other details were laid out in clinical exactness.

On days they were dosed, the beagles were isolated, forced to fast — but allowed water — and given the cocaine-injection jackets for testing. They were returned to their normal quarters, up to three dogs in the same space, after the jackets were removed.

When not being tested, the animals were given chew toys and “regular opportunity for exercise and socialization” and had regular human contact, the research proposal said.

During one of the tests, each dog was put through nine dosing episodes, six of them involving cocaine injections. The other test had 13 dosings, with six involving cocaine.

Researchers said the experiment was expected to be “non-terminal” — in other words, the dogs were to survive.

Charles River Laboratories, which maintains a “dog colony” for testing and had the equipment for the experiments, could use the beagles for further research or euthanize them with an injection of sodium pentobarbital. The radiotelemetry devices that had been implanted could then be “recovered” from the bodies, the proposal said.

White Coat Waste Project says thousands of dogs are used in taxpayer-funded experiments each year.

Another dog experiment that the group revealed included more than \$1 million spent to test the toxicity of drugs — or, as White Coat put it, to “poison” the puppies. The dogs’ vocal cords were cut so they couldn’t bark in the lab, the group said.

	That experiment was funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, run by Dr. Anthony Fauci.
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HEADLINE	02/02 Energy attacks 'Havana syndrome' cases?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/experts-energy-attacks-could-be-behind-some-havana-cases/ https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/us/politics/havana-syndrome-radio-energy.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — A panel of intelligence experts hasn't identified a single culprit for apparent brain injuries reported by U.S. personnel that have been linked to so-called "Havana syndrome," but several potential causes remain plausible, including the use of devices that emit beams of directed energy, officials said Wednesday.</p> <p>The CIA announced last week that the agency considers it unlikely Russia or another foreign adversary is mounting a broad campaign to attack Americans with energy-emitting devices. While most cases have been linked to other causes by doctors and experts, there remains a smaller subset of several dozen cases that experts believe could be explained by the deliberate use of energy.</p> <p>In examining the science behind the incidents, the panel's work is the latest announcement on a sensitive issue in diplomatic and scientific circles. U.S. officials and lawmakers have emphasized they regard the reported illnesses seriously and that any deliberate attack on U.S. personnel would be met with a firm response. But intelligence agencies have not made public evidence that an adversary is to blame. The uncertainty about the cause of the illnesses has added to friction between officials and those suffering from symptoms.</p> <p>Psychological factors alone cannot explain the characteristics displayed by people in that smaller number of cases, said officials who briefed reporters Wednesday on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.</p> <p>The use of pulsed electromagnetic energy "plausibly explains" those characteristics in some cases, as does the use of ultrasound waves at close range, officials said. Experts so far have not identified a specific device that could have been used to target American personnel in the field.</p> <p>The officials who briefed reporters Wednesday said there were significant gaps in what the government knows. Among the recommendations the panel has made is standardizing the information collected across U.S. agencies and creating new markers for identifying and caring for what the government calls "anomalous health incidents."</p> <p>The U.S. is also looking for ways to protect officers and prevent future cases. While officials who briefed reporters would not specify what protection measures they have recommended, they urged any employee who believes they have been affected to come forward immediately.</p> <p>"While we don't have the specific mechanism for each case, what we do know is if you report quickly and promptly get medical care, most people are getting well," one official said.</p> <p>In a statement, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and CIA Director William Burns said the U.S. government "remains committed to providing access to care for those who need it, and we will continue to share as much information as possible with our workforce and the American public as our efforts continue."</p> <p>"Havana syndrome" cases date to a series of reported brain injuries in 2016 at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba. Incidents have been reported by diplomats, intelligence officers and military personnel in the Washington area and at global postings.</p>

The Biden administration has faced pressure from lawmakers in both parties to investigate cases linked to “Havana syndrome” and provide better care for people who have reported the sudden onset of sometimes debilitating headaches, dizziness, and other symptoms.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday named a senior National Security Council official to coordinate the government’s response to possible incidents related to Havana syndrome.

WASHINGTON — A panel of experts assembled by the Biden administration concluded on Wednesday that stress or psychosomatic reactions could not explain some of the incidents of Havana syndrome they had reviewed, and said that radio waves could have caused some of the injuries among C.I.A. officers and diplomats.

The panel, which included both government scientists and outside experts, did not try to determine who was responsible for the incidents, and officials said the conclusions did not contradict interim findings by the C.I.A. that unexplained incidents were not the result of a sustained global campaign by Russia or another adversary.

But there are tensions between the panel’s work and the C.I.A.’s conclusions. The panel’s findings could bolster the arguments of victims and lawmakers who believe a hostile foreign nation could have caused at least some of the injuries associated with Havana syndrome, perhaps by using a listening device.

The panel’s conclusions also undercut the arguments of some outside experts that mass hysteria, stress or psychosomatic reactions were the cause of the incidents. The panel found that stress reactions could have contributed to ongoing symptoms, but that no so-called functional illness or mass hysteria could explain the initial injuries in the cases that were the focus of its investigation.

Intelligence officials briefed on the panel’s findings did not say how many cases it had focused on, though they said between 10 and 20 victims were interviewed. They said the panel focused on cases in which victims heard a strange sound or felt pressure and then experienced a loss of balance and ear pain. In addition, the panel focused on cases in which the victims reported the sounds as coming from a specific direction.

The panel, assembled under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the C.I.A., was given access to more than 1,000 classified documents as well as medical records of some victims. Its mandate, officials said, was to determine what mechanisms could have plausibly caused the injuries.

The panel identified one potential cause as what it called pulsed electromagnetic energy, particularly in the radio frequency range, also known as directed energy. The panel said ultrasound also could have caused some of the injuries. That mechanism, however, is less likely, since any ultrasound device has to be much closer to people to injure them.

The panel ruled out the possibility that chemical and biological agents, ionizing radiation or audible sounds could have caused the unexplained injuries.

Havana syndrome was named after injuries reported by a group of C.I.A. officers and diplomats working in Cuba beginning in late 2016. Since then, incidents have been reported in 70 different countries, officials said. While some senior Trump administration officials viewed the incidents skeptically, the Biden administration came to office last year pledging to redouble efforts to learn their cause.

The Biden administration has assigned the task of attributing who is responsible for the unexplained cases to a C.I.A. analytical team known as the Global Health Incident Cell. That team reported in January that a majority of incidents could be explained by environmental factors or undiagnosed medical conditions. While the team ruled out a sustained global campaign to injure American spies and diplomats, the C.I.A. said it was continuing to look at several dozen cases.

Other officials have said the number of unexplained cases is closer to 100.

The panel's findings suggest that in at least some of those cases, a hostile country could have used a directed-energy or ultrasound device to injure American officials either on purpose or inadvertently.

There is a consensus among American intelligence agencies that there was not a broad campaign by a single nation to injure U.S. spies and diplomats deliberately, officials said. But that does not mean that foreign adversaries were not involved in a limited number of incidents.

In an interview ahead of the release of the panel's conclusions, Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine and a member of the Intelligence Committee, said she had hypothesized that eavesdropping devices using some form of energy had injured people in various locations.

"My theory has always been that it was some sort of collection device, and it wasn't targeting people, rather their computers, their phones, their secret information," said Ms. Collins, who has sponsored a bill called the Havana Act to compensate victims. "The injuries and illnesses were, if you will, collateral damage from the collection device."

A group of victims who had been critical of the C.I.A.'s interim report released a statement on Wednesday saying that the panel's work should have been included alongside the agency's findings to present a fuller picture.

Mark S. Zaid, a lawyer who represents multiple victims of Havana syndrome, said that there needed to be more coordination in the government investigations, and that the inquiries needed to look at incidents further in the past.

"These piecemeal agency reviews at times reveal inconsistent and even contradictory results that undermine the effort to resolve this controversy," Mr. Zaid said.

On Tuesday, the White House announced that Maher Bitar, the senior director for intelligence on the National Security Council staff, would serve as the coordinator to oversee the investigation of the anomalous health incidents.

Intelligence officials insist the work done over the past year has been coordinated and say it is wrong to describe the panel's findings as undercutting the C.I.A.'s analytic work. While pulsed energy or microwaves could, scientifically, cause unexplained brain injuries and the kind of symptoms associated with Havana syndrome, that possibility does not prove that a hostile country used those means to injure Americans, an intelligence official said.

Another report began being circulated by the State Department on Wednesday. That report, completed late last year by JASON, an independent group of scientists, looked at about 200 cases and said credible explanations had been found in all but 20 to 30 of them. Those remaining cases, the group found, were more complex and defied easy explanations.

The report, which was commissioned by the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, said it was not possible to conclude whether the Havana syndrome symptoms were caused by an intentional attack. But the group could not rule out the possibility of "mechanisms that do not cause any physical harm but which might constitute harassment and lead to health conditions and functional disorders."

The report eliminated some forms of directed energy as potential causes but said others were possibilities. Officials said the report looked at a subset of the data examined by the intelligence agencies' panel.

The intelligence agencies' panel recommended improving the collection of incident and medical data, and it called on doctors to work to identify new medical markers that could be detected in victims and help identify future Havana syndrome cases. In the long term, the panel said that better methods needed to be developed to diagnose inner ear injuries immediately after incidents occur.

	<p>The panel found that the use of a directed-energy device was theoretically possible, but it did not identify a specific device that could have caused the injuries, intelligence officials briefed on the findings said.</p> <p>The panel's membership included some members of a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine group that concluded last year that a directed radio frequency energy device or microwave device could have caused the injuries associated with Havana syndrome.</p> <p>Some intelligence officials believe that the sustained use of a collection device, particularly if multiple adversaries had used it, would have been detected by the United States. But hypothetically, a collection device or other piece of equipment used by a foreign adversary could have caused collateral health effects without the other nation being aware of the damage, at least initially.</p> <p>Officials said there was no consensus yet on the hypothesis that an eavesdropping device could be involved in a limited number of cases, in large measure because the United States has not identified a device that could have caused the injuries and has not determined that such a device was used near the unexplained incidents.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Sniper rifles found in magnet fishing
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/02/us/florida-sniper-rifle-magnet-fishing-trnd/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)A Florida man and his grandson couldn't believe their eyes when they reeled in more than just some scrap metal and bottle caps during a magnet fishing weekend trip.</p> <p>Duane Smith and his 11-year-old grandson, Allen Cadwalader, were out on a magnet fishing trip on January 30 in Homestead, a suburb of Miami, Florida, when within five minutes of their arrival, Cadwalader reeled in two sniper rifle receivers and bolt carrier groups wrapped in shrink wrap, Smith told CNN.</p> <p>This was their first time magnet fishing, Smith said, and he chose a bridge with a canal near where he normally goes hiking.</p> <p>Magnet fishing uses a strong magnet attached to a thick rope in an attempt to fish out metal objects that have sunk to the bottom of canals, lakes, ponds and rivers.</p> <p>It's a hobby Smith recently became interested in after watching several YouTube videos about the ins and outs. He figured this would be a more engaging activity for his grandson, who has autism, than traditional fishing.</p> <p>"With magnet fishing every time I cast out or every other time I'm coming up with something," Smith said. "There's a bottle cap or you know, \$7,000 sniper rifle."</p> <p>Smith calls it beginners luck but said thanks to the YouTube videos he watched, he was prepared to find all sorts of things.</p> <p>"It's kind of like a gambling addiction where you don't know what the next pull of the slot machine is gonna be," Smith said. "A lot cheaper than playing slots."</p> <p>Smith, who is retired infantry soldier and trained in deploying sniper weapons, said he knew the weapons were military grade. He estimates each piece weighed 20 pounds and after doing some research, Smith estimates they're worth \$20,000 and could have been there for up to a year because of the condition they were in.</p> <p>The guns were not loaded, according to Smith, and no ammunition was found.</p>

	<p>The weapons were covered in debris, so once they got home, Smith and Cadwalader cleaned them off for 30 minutes to an hour to find that the serial numbers had been ground off.</p> <p>The weapons were turned over to Miami-Dade Police and will be sent to the forensics lab to be processed, if possible, depending on the actual condition of the weapons, Detective Alvaro Zabaleta with Miami-Dade Police told CNN.</p> <p>Processing has to be completed in order to determine if the weapons were used in a crime.</p> <p>In the meantime, Miami Dade Police said they could not confirm the information on the weapon type, condition or status until they are processed by their forensics lab.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Thousands of planes flying empty
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/airplanes-empty-slots-covid/
GIST	<p>IN DECEMBER 2021, 27,591 aircraft took off or landed at Frankfurt airport—890 every day. But this winter, many of them weren’t carrying any passengers at all. Lufthansa, Germany’s national airline, which is based in Frankfurt, has admitted to running 21,000 empty flights this winter, using its own planes and those of its Belgian subsidiary, Brussels Airlines, in an attempt to keep hold of airport slots.</p> <p>Although anti-air travel campaigners believe ghost flights are a widespread issue that airlines don’t publicly disclose, Lufthansa is so far the only airline to go public about its own figures. In January, climate activist Greta Thunberg tweeted her disbelief over the scale of the issue. Unusually, she was joined by voices within the industry. One of them was Lufthansa’s own chief executive, Carsten Spohr, who said the journeys were “empty, unnecessary flights just to secure our landing and takeoff rights.” But the company argues that it can’t change its approach: Those ghost flights are happening because airlines are required to conduct a certain proportion of their planned flights in order to keep slots at high-trafficked airports.</p> <p>A Greenpeace analysis indicates that if Lufthansa’s practice of operating no-passenger flights were replicated equally across the European aviation sector, it would mean that more than 100,000 “ghost flights” were operating in Europe this year, spitting out carbon dioxide emissions equivalent to 1.4 million gas-guzzling cars. “We’re in a climate crisis, and the transport sector has the fastest-growing emissions in the EU,” says Greenpeace spokesperson Herwig Schuster. “Pointless, polluting ‘ghost flights’ are just the tip of the iceberg.”</p> <p>Aviation analysts are split on the scale of the ghost flight problem. Some believe the issue has been overhyped and is likely not more prevalent than the few airlines that have admitted to operating them. Others say there are likely tens of thousands of such flights operating—with their carriers declining to say anything because of the PR blowback.</p> <p>“The only reason we have [airport] slots is that it recognizes a shortage of capacity at an airport,” says John Strickland of JLS Consulting, an aviation consultant. “If there wasn’t any shortage of capacity, airlines could land and take off within reason whenever they want to.” However, a disparity between the volume of demand for takeoff and landing slots and the number of slots available at key airports means that airlines compete fiercely for spaces. In 2020, 62 million flights took place at the world’s airports, according to industry body Airports Council International. While that number sounds enormous, it’s down nearly 40 percent year on year. To handle demand, more than 200 airports worldwide operate some kind of slot system, handling a combined 1.5 billion passengers. If you board a flight anywhere in the world, there’s a 43 percent chance your flight is slot managed.</p> <p>Airlines even pay their competitors to take over slots: Two highly prized slots at London Heathrow airport reportedly changed hands for \$75 million in 2016, when tiny cash-rich airline Oman Air made Air France-KLM an offer it couldn’t refuse for a sleepy 5.30 am arrival from Muscat to the UK capital. “It’s all about using the ground and airspace to make the most of what you have,” says James Pearson, a route development analyst at Simple Flying, an airline consultancy. “Theoretically it’s a very good idea.”</p>

The current lack of demand for airlines has increased the tension between big, incumbent companies, who hold many of the slots, and their newer, nimbler competitors, who want access to them, says US aviation analyst Bob Mann. That lack of demand is, of course, the long hangover from the Covid-19 pandemic and the dampening effect it has had on global air travel.

Global air traffic [dropped 60 percent](#) in 2020 compared to 2019 levels, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). In 2021, passenger numbers were still 49 percent down on the pre-pandemic era, and even as the world begins to reopen in 2022, demand is still expected to be between 28 and 33 percent lower than in 2019. The industry will lose an estimated \$200 billion as around 1.3 billion fewer passengers travel in 2022 than in 2019, the ICAO says. Passengers just aren't flying—but airlines need to run services in order to keep their precious slots at airports. "If you lose your slot, you've lost an asset off your balance sheet," says aviation analyst David Gleave.

In March 2020, the European Commission suspended "use it or lose it" rules that require airlines to fly 80 percent of the flight slots they're allocated at European airports or have their berths given to competitors. [The rules have been waived](#) before, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US and the aftermath of the 2008-9 financial crash. While the 80 percent rule hasn't returned, a requirement for airlines to use 50 percent of their slots was [instated in October 2021](#) and will increase to 64 percent in March 2022. "Even if we are not there yet, we can take a step further toward the return to normal airport slot management next summer," says European commissioner for transport Adina-Ioana Vălean. The UK, which left the European Union in January 2020, has [set its use it or lose it level at 70 percent](#).

When Covid-19 first hit, authorities who oversaw the distribution of slots waived their requirements. "They recognized that airlines weren't going to be able to fly as often, and they were just flying fresh air, given the lack of traffic," says Strickland. "But now what's happening is we're trying to wind back the other way. As we hope traffic builds up again, you find both airports and some airlines that aren't slot-holders are arguing the threshold should be pushed back up to where it was."

Low-cost airlines like Ryanair and EasyJet often have the demand—and the desire—to [fill slots that are currently going unused](#). Faced with this, incumbents may not have the demand to meet their pre-pandemic slots but are conscious that at some point, air travel will likely bounce back. So they're taking to the skies with empty or near-empty planes in order to maintain their stranglehold over the market. It's a calculated bet: Short-term losses will be paid back by long-term returns. Flying empty planes gives airlines access to slots they hope will, in time, be filled with fuller flights. Slots are allocated twice a year, in the summer and winter period, at [slot allocation conferences](#) organized by ICAO. Airlines wanting slots must submit a request for them 30 days before the conference begins. At every conference, 50 percent of the slots available are allocated to new entrants, as per ICAO rules. Pearson estimates that the amount airlines lose in flying empty planes—in the thousands of dollars per flight—is a pittance compared to what they could make from retaining the rights to those routes and slots when the industry returns to normal. "If they don't have those going forward, especially as the market starts to pick up again for the summer season, they're going to be in an even worse situation."

However, the industry sees the madness in flying empty planes. Willie Walsh, director of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), [has said](#) the UK's decision to increase its use it or lose it level to 70 percent is "condemning airlines to operate thousands of flights at low capacity, which is environmentally stupid." An [emissions calculator developed by the ICAO](#) suggests that a flight between London Heathrow and Amsterdam's Schiphol airport would burn more than 2,500 kilograms of fuel on a single leg, with the associated carbon dioxide emissions.

"These airlines probably don't want to do it, but they're backed into a corner," says Pearson. "They have no option but to do it." The environmental implications are massive, of course—but as a proportion of all flights, the number of ghost journeys is likely minute.

	<p>Pearson reckons the problem shows the inflexibility of the slot system when confronted with what everyone hopes is a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Yet he's not sure there's any alternative. Continue to waive the use it or lose it limits and you risk alienating the fast-growing, low-budget airlines like Ryanair and Wizz Air, which are providing much of the growth in the airline sector—and desperately want in on some of the most prized slots currently tied up by the aviation giants.</p> <p>There is a compound issue with letting low-cost, short-haul airlines take all the slots at major airports like London Heathrow, says Gleave: “How are you going to fly to the United States?”</p> <p>Ramp up the use it or lose it percentage too quickly and you'll see more empty flights, polluting the planet at a time when we've become more attuned than ever to the environmental impact of air travel. “I'm not 100 percent sure what a good solution would be,” Pearson says. “You have to manage the lack of capacity versus high demand. I'm not sure how else you're going to do that, to be perfectly honest.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 New asteroid shares Earth's orbit
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/science/astronomy-asteroid-trojan.html
GIST	<p>Astronomers have discovered a captive asteroid shadowing Earth in its orbit.</p> <p>The asteroid, known as 2020 XL5, is only the second of its type ever seen, shepherded by Earth's gravity into an orbit that is locked in synchrony with our planet's. It has not shared our orbit for long — a few centuries, probably. And it will not be there in the far future. Simulations indicate that 2020 XL5 will slip out of Earth's grasp within 4,000 years and head into the wider solar system.</p> <p>But its presence offers a tantalizing glimpse of what else might be out there in the local gravitational whirlpools. Some bits might date back to the beginning of the solar system — shades of the building blocks that coalesced into our planet.</p> <p>“These objects are not as exotic as we think,” said Toni Santana-Ros, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Barcelona in Spain and an author of a paper describing the discovery, which was published on Tuesday in the journal Nature Communications. (A separate team of astronomers came to a similar conclusion in December.)</p> <p>When two objects orbit each other, there are five points, known as Lagrange points, where the gravity of the two essentially balance, and a much smaller mass can sit there in equilibrium. Two of the five Lagrange points, known as L4 and L5, are stable: If a small body there is nudged slightly, it remains at that point. At the three unstable Lagrange points — L1 through L3 — a nudge will push the small body away for good.</p> <p>(The unstable Lagrange points can still be very useful. The newly launched James Webb Space Telescope is about 900,000 miles away at the second Lagrange point, or L2, of the sun-Earth system. The instrument relies on thrusters to keep it from drifting away.)</p> <p>Back in 1906, Max Wolf, a German astronomer who developed a photographic technique to discover asteroids, found an asteroid in the same orbit as Jupiter, always ahead of the planet by 60 degrees, or one-sixth of an orbit. Later observers found other asteroids in about the same place as well as asteroids that lagged Jupiter by the same margin.</p> <p>These fit a prediction made more than a century earlier by mathematician Jose-Louis Lagrange. Astronomers started naming these objects after heroes of the Trojan War, and the bodies became known as the Trojan asteroids.</p> <p>Many of Jupiter's more than 11,000 Trojans do appear to be primordial remnants from the formation of the solar system. In October, NASA launched a probe named Lucy, after the fossilized skeleton of an early hominid ancestor, to visit several of them.</p>

Similar asteroids appear to be trapped in the orbits of Venus, Mars, Uranus and Neptune. None have been found sharing Saturn's orbit — the disruptive gravity of Jupiter is thought to be at fault — or Mercury's, where any tiny Trojans would be all but impossible to find in the glare of the sun.

Earth also appeared to lack Trojan asteroids until astronomers found one in 2010 at the L4 Lagrange point, 60 degrees ahead of Earth. Subsequent searches came up empty until Pan-Starrs, an automated sky survey in Hawaii, turned up an intriguing object, 2020 XL5, that seemed like it might also be trapped around L4. But the initial observations were insufficient to definitively pin down the object's orbit. In 2021, an international team of astronomers including Dr. Santana-Ros made additional sightings of 2020 XL5 using three ground-based telescopes. The team was then able to search through images dating back to 2012 — where the asteroid indeed appeared, although no one had recognized it as one.

A decade of data was finally enough to firmly chart 2020 XL5's elliptical orbit. "We were 100 percent sure this was an Earth Trojan," Dr. Santana-Ros said.

Although 2020 XL5 is trapped in an orbit around a stable Lagrange point, it is not particularly close to L4. Its elliptical orbit, tilted nearly 14 degrees to the orbit of the planets, sweeps it closer to the sun than Venus and almost as far out as Mars.

This makes it vulnerable to gravitational buffeting from other planets, especially Venus.

The researchers ran computer simulations of the orbit of 2020 XL5, tweaking it 800 times. Sometimes the asteroid escaped from the Lagrange point within 3,500 years; sometimes it loitered 5,000 years or more. But the orbit appears unlikely to remain stable for much longer than that.

From appearances, 2020 XL5 is a dark, carbon-rich body, perhaps an interloper from the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. The researchers estimate its diameter at about three-quarters of a mile, much larger than the Earth Trojan discovered in 2010, which was estimated to be about a quarter-mile in diameter and is also located at the L4 Lagrange point.

Whereas the two known Earth Trojans appear to be transitory additions to our orbital neighborhood, other bodies that hover closer to the stable Lagrange points could remain in place indefinitely, raising the possibility that some of the primordial building blocks of Earth might still be found there.

"All the formation models gives you the idea that planets should have these families going around their L4 and L5 points from the beginning," said Federica Spoto, an astronomer at the Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Mass., who was not involved with the research.

She added, "If we were able to find something like that, we might be able to understand what happened at the beginning, basically."

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/03 Argentina: tainted cocaine kills 17
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/03/americas/tainted-cocaine-argentina-intl-scli/index.html
GIST	<p>Buenos Aires, Argentina At least 17 people have died in Argentina after consuming cocaine suspected of containing a poisonous substance, with the cases clustered around several towns in sprawling Buenos Aires province, officials and local media said on Wednesday.</p> <p>Another 56 people have been hospitalized, a government source told Reuters, adding that more are seeking hospital care in eight of the province's municipalities due to the toxic cocaine.</p>

The source said the death toll -- currently from the towns of Hurlingham, San Martin and Tres de Febrero - will likely rise further.

Buenos Aires province, the country's most populous, is home to many suburbs of the national capital of the same name.

Officials believe some of the victims suffered from opioid intoxication, according to a statement from the province's health ministry released on Wednesday.

The number of those hospitalized with serious illness is "constantly rising," it added.

Provincial security forces detained some people suspected of selling the drug after the first deaths occurred on Wednesday.

Some local media outlets reported that the cocaine had been "cut" with a toxic substance, likely by a drug gang looking to reduce costs amid a turf war with rival groups.

"We are waiting for the laboratory results and the results of the investigations into the people who have been detained," Sergio Berni, the province's security minister, told local television.

Reuters could not immediately reach the police and courts for further information.

The local government of Tres de Febrero said in a statement it was aware of people falling seriously ill due to "allegedly adulterated cocaine" and was working with emergency services and hospitals to prevent more deaths.

It urged people to discard any drugs bought recently, especially those with symptoms of confusion, convulsions or loss of consciousness.

"This isn't a normal investigation," San Martin prosecutor Marcelo Lapargo told local news outlet La Nacion+, citing expedited police raids aimed at removing all the tainted cocaine.

"What mattered most today was to stop the sales to prevent further deaths."

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HEADLINE	02/02 Rape at South Lake Union homeless camp
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/residents-alarmed-after-woman-raped-at-south-lake-union-homeless-camp
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — People living near an encampment on Mercer and Fairview in South Lake Union said they are not only horrified but fed up with crime.</p> <p>"It's a disaster," said Doug Farrell. "People spend a lot of money to live here. Companies spend a ton of money to rent space what's supposed to be a nice part of town and you've got drugs and people shooting up."</p> <p>The problems don't stop there. Back in December, King County prosecutors said a woman was raped at the encampment. They believe Paris Deshan Alcantara is the one responsible. He was in court Wednesday with a \$100,000 bail.</p> <p>"We argued before a judge that this person is a danger to the community, because of the circumstances but also his previous history of domestic violence and criminal trespass," said Casey McNerthney</p> <p>While Alcantra is behind bars, neighbors are urging the city's new administration to do improve public safety, especially when it comes to areas near homeless encampments.</p> <p>"I'm surprised the city tolerates it," Farrell said. "I'm hoping our new mayor is going to do something about it, so let's see what he's got in mind."</p>

	<p>We looked into the number of crimes reported in the area where the encampment is and saw a jump in both aggravated assaults and sex offenses from 2020 through 2021.</p> <p>We reached out to Mayor Bruce Harrell for an on camera interview to see what the plan is for this this encampment. He wasn't available, but his office sent a statement to KOMO news saying:</p> <p>“He remains committed to addressing the homelessness crisis and issues of public safety with urgency and action.”</p> <p>In the mean time, neighbors said they are doing what they can to keep themselves safe.</p> <p>“I personally don't do a lot of walking after dark, so that means this time of year I'm not out,” said Jeanine Fox.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 FAA: 4 SEA flights hit by laser
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/4-in-flight-airplanes-hit-with-laser-near-sea-tac
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. - The Federal Aviation Administration said that four flights reported being hit by a green laser near the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Jan. 28.</p> <p>The four flights reported the incident around 6:30 p.m. All were within at most, a five-mile radius of the airport.</p> <p>All planes landed without incident and no injuries were reported.</p> <p>It's a federal crime to point a laser at an aircraft. The FAA says intentionally aiming lasers at aircrafts poses a safety threat to pilots. Many high-powered lasers can incapacitate pilots flying aircraft that may be carrying hundreds of passengers, the FAA explains on their website.</p> <p>There were 6,852 laser incidents reported to the FAA in 2020, up from 6,136 in 2019. This is the highest reported number of incidents since 2016.</p> <p>The FAA will investigate these incidents.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Digital warfare tech at sea; circumvent US
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/technology-business-middle-east-iran-shipping-44d5cdc52e589c44a7bb0fc5be59d156
GIST	<p>MIAMI (AP) — Technology to hide a ship's location previously available only to the world's militaries is spreading fast through the global maritime industry as governments from Iran to Venezuela — and the rogue shipping companies they depend on to move their petroleum products — look for stealthier ways to circumvent U.S. sanctions.</p> <p>Windward, a maritime intelligence company whose data is used by the U.S. government to investigate sanctions violations, said that since January 2020 it has detected more than 200 vessels involved in over 350 incidents in which they appear to have electronically manipulated their GPS location.</p> <p>“This is out of hand right now,” Matan Peled, co-founder of Windward and a former Israeli naval officer, said in an interview. “It's not driven by countries or superpowers. It's ordinary companies using this technique. The scale is astonishing.”</p> <p>Peled said U.S. authorities have been slow to catch on to the spread of technology that has been part of the electronic warfare arsenal for decades but is only now cropping up in commercial shipping, with serious national security, environmental and maritime safety implications.</p>

Windward was able to identify suspect ships using technology that detects digital tracks that don't correspond to actual movements, such as hairpin turns at breakneck speed or drifting in the form of perfect crop circles.

William Fallon, a retired four-star admiral and former head of the U.S. Pacific Command, said U.S. authorities have been aware for some time of the threat from electronic manipulation, one of a growing number of so-called "gray zone" national security challenges that cut across traditional military, commercial and economic lines.

"Any time you can deceive somebody into believing you're somewhere where you're not is concerning," said Fallon, who is now a board member of the American Security Project, a Washington think tank. "It illustrates the extent to which people who don't have any scruples are willing to go to achieve their objectives and the ease with which they can do it."

One of the more egregious examples found by Windward involves a 183-meter-long oil tanker that could be tracked sailing to Iraq even as it was in reality loading crude in Iran, which is banned from selling its oil by U.S. sanctions.

The tanker, whose name Windward asked to be withheld so as not to disrupt any potential U.S. government investigation, set sail on Feb. 11, 2021, from the United Arab Emirates, reporting its destination as Basra, Iraq. When it was 20 nautical miles away, its global navigation system began exhibiting strange drifting patterns. Twelve days later, its transmission stabilized and it could be tracked heading back through the Hormuz strait at normal sailing speed, this time fully laden with crude.

Satellite imagery shows that during the two-week voyage a ship of identical length and with the same red deck broken up by a white pole and bridge was spotted dozens of nautical miles away, in Iran's Kharg Island oil terminal. That vessel was then followed on satellite sailing back to the UAE, its course merging with the reported position of the original ship after it resumed its normal transmission.

Under a United Nations maritime treaty, ships of over 300 tons have been required since 2004 to use an automated identification system to avoid collisions and assist rescues in the event of a spill or accident at sea. Tampering with its use is a major breach that can lead to official sanctions for a vessel and its owners.

But what was intended as an at-sea safety mechanism has also driven a proliferation in ship-spotting platforms like MarineTraffic.com.

Experts say such websites can be easily tricked since they partly rely on data gathered from thousands of amateur base stations that function like police radio scanners picking up maritime movements. Last year, two journalists from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation managed to register online a fake base station near Somalia and insert the false coordinates of a real vessel. Seconds later, the falsified location popped up on MarineTraffic.com.

"To minimize errors and always ensure data integrity, MarineTraffic has introduced a series of key actions in the last few months as we strive to keep securing incoming data further," MarineTraffic's Anastassis Tourois said in a statement. Steps include blocking specific stations and IP addressees that consistently transmit false data.

Despite such quality control efforts, the sheer volume of data has cut into the utility of such open-source platforms, two U.S. intelligence officers told The Associated Press. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss what they described as the latest — and most extreme — tactic in the cat and mouse game between authorities and bad actors.

Another blind spot: China. The recent implementation of a harsh data privacy law has cut by nearly half the amount of terrestrial data on maritime activity in Chinese waters, making it harder to track everything

from activity at busy ports key to global supply chains to the movements of the world's largest distant water fishing fleet.

Researchers from Global Fishing Watch, which uses satellite data and machine learning to monitor activity at sea, have made similar findings as Windward. It has identified 30 vessels whose locations, as reported on ship-tracking platforms, regularly fell outside the range of the satellite receiving the ship's position.

Among the vessels caught suspected of falsifying its digital tracks was the Tulip, a Panama-flagged oil tanker. For almost six months last year, it broadcast its position along the west coast of Africa. But the satellite that should have picked up the ship's movements was often thousands of miles away, suggesting the ship was likely in Venezuela.

The Associated Press obtained internal documents from Venezuela's state-owned oil company indicating the Tulip loaded 450,000 barrels of fuel oil during the first 15 days of September. Like several other of the suspicious vessels, the crude was purchased by a shell company, M and Y Trading Co., registered in Hong Kong in November 2020, according to the documents. The Tulip is owned by another Hong Kong-registered shell, Victory Marine Ltd. Neither company returned emails seeking comment.

Bjorn Bergman, a data analyst for Global Fishing Watch and Sky Truth, said attempts to hide a ship's position can be easily detected.

"While we need to remain vigilant, vessel operators choosing to manipulate their data are just going to end up shining a spotlight on their activities," he said.

Of the 200 vessels identified by Windward with similar patterns of deception, the vast majority exhibited no other or just a few classic red flags such as disabling on-ship tracking systems, falsifying a vessel's flag state or constantly changing ownership from one shell company to another.

These shipping practices have become clear indications for possible involvement in sanctions evasion and are described as such in a 2020 advisory by the U.S. State and Treasury departments and the U.S. Coast Guard.

But the advisory, heralded as an important step to crack down on the shipping companies that do business with U.S. adversaries, makes no mention of the latest GPS trick to hide illicit trade in oil, seafood and other products. As a result, the practice has exploded into what Windward has called a "free for all" with no immediate end in sight

"The vast majority of these vessels were meticulously chosen for these missions because they are otherwise well behaved," said Dror Salzman, a risk product manager at Windward. "If you walk to a bank with a ski mask on, everyone knows what you're up to. But here it's like they are working from the inside with the teller. Nobody can see them."

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HEADLINE	02/03 Shooting on Greyhound bus: 1 dead
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/greyhound-bus-shooting-one-dead-four-wounded-walmart-arrest/
GIST	<p>Oroville, California — A suspect is in custody after five people were shot Wednesday night on a Greyhound bus behind a gas station convenience store, CBS Sacramento reports.</p> <p>Oroville Mayor Chuck Reynolds said in a series of Facebook posts that there was an active shooter near an AMPM. The Butte County Sheriff's Office said the bus stopped behind the AMPM following an altercation.</p> <p>Authorities said one of the victims died at the scene. Reynolds told CBS Sacramento the other four were airlifted to hospitals.</p> <p>One of them was a minor who suffered non-life-threatening injuries, the mayor confirmed.</p>

	<p>"I think that this is a changing world where life is not as precious as it used to be," Reynolds lamented to the station.</p> <p>The mayor said the suspect, who he later described as "incoherent," fled to a nearby Walmart, where he got into a physical altercation. CBS Sacramento reports it was with a customer and there was no gunfire inside the Walmart.</p> <p>At some point, the suspect took off his clothes before being taken into custody, CBS Sacramento says.</p> <p>The sheriff's office said the suspect was booked into the Butte County Jail.</p> <p>There was no word on the suspect's motive.</p> <p>Oroville is some 65 miles north of Sacramento.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Newcastle: 'Oceans 11-style' bank robbery
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/newcastle-police-seek-suspect-in-oceans-eleven-style-bank-robbery
GIST	<p>NEWCASTLE, Wash. - Newcastle Police are investigating an elaborate and bizarre bank robbery attempt in early January.</p> <p>Authorities say employees of Key Bank were opening the morning of Jan. 3, 2022, when they noticed a leak from a ceiling tile. Figuring it was related to ongoing heavy rain earlier that month, employees called their facilities company to check out the damage.</p> <p>Facilities workers instead found a 3-by-3 foot hole cut into the roof, so the bank called Newcastle Police.</p> <p>Officers and roofing company workers inspected the hole and did not see any signs someone made entry into the bank, and employees who had already been working for four hours had not seen anything suspicious, so police determined someone may have tried entering over the weekend but gave up.</p> <p>The roof was patched and a burglary report was taken.</p> <p>Hours later at 5:30 p.m., however, a suspect dropped in from the ceiling tiles in what Police Chief Jason Houck described as an "Oceans Eleven type" bank robbery. Authorities believe the suspect was hiding in the ceiling tiles for 12–13 hours.</p> <p>The suspect then zip-tied three employees to each other and to nearby cabinets, demanding access to the bank vault. Employees told the suspect that was not possible, given security measures. The suspect kept demanding access to the vault, but eventually left out the front door.</p> <p>Shortly after, an employee wrestled free of the restraints and called 911.</p> <p>Descriptions of the suspect are very limited, but Newcastle Police are certain they would have told someone about the incident, as "it is too bizarre a story for someone to keep to themselves." Anyone with information leading to an arrest could receive a cash reward of up to \$1,000. Tipsters are asked to call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS, or submit through the P3 Tips App.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Fight against 'iron pipeline' of illegal guns
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/biden-grappling-with-perfect-storm-of-rising-gun-violence-2/

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is expanding a crackdown on untraceable guns and firearms trafficking along the East Coast “iron pipeline” and elsewhere as police departments across the nation fight surging gun violence that’s left a trail of bloodshed already this year.

President Joe Biden plans to announce the effort during a visit Thursday to New York City, where he’ll also showcase his plan to work with state and local law enforcement to get guns and repeat shooters off the streets. Biden also will stop at a school to meet with violence intervention leaders.

The visit comes as illegal guns flood the streets and gun violence claims scores of lives, including those of police officers. At the same time, Biden, a Democrat, is trying to dispel criticism from the right that he hasn’t been tough enough on crime.

But his modest announcements — expanding on initiatives already underway and offering suggestions for localities on how to spend federal dollars — demonstrate the limits to what he can do when there is no appetite in Congress to pass gun legislation. The strongest effort in recent years failed, even after 20 children and six adults were killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.

Biden also is trying to navigate the complex politics of the moment: finding ways to combat crime while also pushing for greater accountability after killings of Black people by police. The two efforts do not have to be at odds, though they are often billed that way.

All this unfolds against the backdrop of recent polls showing that Americans are increasingly concerned about crime and that Republicans have an advantage over Democrats as the party that would do a better job dealing with it. The White House is pushing back against GOP efforts to paint Biden as soft.

“I think we all agree or should agree that violent crime is a serious problem,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said this week. “Our view is that instead of turning this into a political football, we need to be focused from the beginning of the president’s time in office on reducing crime and keeping our communities safe.”

Guns are at the center of the debate as the nation grapples with homicides that spiked nationally in 2020. At least seven 16-year-olds were killed in shootings last year in New York alone. And 32 officers have been shot on the job in 2022, five fatally. Two died in New York in two weeks and two campus officers were killed in Virginia on Tuesday.

Americans purchased a record number of firearms in 2020. Law enforcement officers recovered historically high numbers of firearms last year and are coming across more firearms stripped of serial numbers, making them impossible to trace.

Some early data suggests that the period between when a gun was purchased and used in a crime and recovered by police has shortened, compared with earlier years.

To combat this, the Biden administration is clamping down more on traders of “ghost guns,” homemade firearms that lack serial numbers used to trace them and that are often purchased without a background check.

The Justice Department is also working to stop the movement of guns north along the Interstate 95 corridor from Southern states with lax gun laws. Federal prosecutors will prioritize cases of those who sell or transfer guns used in violent crime and, if Biden’s budget is enacted, get specific agents dedicated to the effort.

Los Angeles and New York are among the cities with federal strike forces aimed at cracking down on gun trafficking. Federal agents are embedded in homicide units in police departments around the country, and the U.S. Marshals Service regularly conducts fugitive sweeps to arrest people with outstanding state or federal warrants.

In May, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives will host police executives from across the country to collaborate on solutions to gun violence. But the agency has been without a permanent leader since 2013, and Biden's first nominee was rejected by Republicans and some moderate Democrats. There's no sign of a new nominee.

Biden has proposed a large increase in dollars for local community policing programs, and if his social spending agenda were to pass, even more funds would be made available — but that effort is stalled in Congress, too.

He's also encouraged cities to invest some of their COVID-19 relief money into policing and pushed alternative crime reduction steps such as increased community support and summer jobs for teenagers. He was expected to talk more about this effort on Thursday.

Some states and cities are already acting. Republican Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio proposed spending \$250 million in federal funds to help first responders fight violent crime and recover from pandemic-related hardship. In Aurora, Colorado, where officers have left the force, those who remain will receive bonuses totaling \$6 million.

Chief Michel Moore of the Los Angeles Police Department said more money is important but fully staffed federal law enforcement agencies would also make a big difference.

"The efforts of criminal justice reform need to include the factors feeding into violent crime," he said. "Our conversations with the White House have been that we recognize the need for criminal justice reform, the role of policing and accountability, but we also need to be similarly invested in bringing police the needed resources to address the increase in crime."

Biden will be joined in New York by Attorney General Merrick Garland, Gov. Kathy Hochul and Mayor Eric Adams, a former police captain. Once an outspoken critic of his own department and someone who was beaten by police as a teenager, Adams portrayed himself during his campaign as someone who could bridge the divide between the New York Police Department and activists pushing for major change.

Adams' tough-yet-middle-ground approach is one that Biden and other moderate Democrats have sought out, especially as they try to distance themselves from calls from progressives to shift money away from police departments and into social programs.

During a middle-of-the-night news conference following the shooting late Tuesday of an off-duty officer, Adams said he hoped federal and state lawmakers would give police the help they deserved.

"These officers, every day, put on their uniforms, pin that shield on their chest, put that bulletproof vest on and go back into the streets," he said. "They still go back and do their jobs. Now it's time for lawmakers to do their job."

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HEADLINE	02/02 Thieves targeting copper wire in Seattle
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/thieves-targeting-copper-wire-in-seattle-as-city-leaders-wrestling-with-solutions
GIST	<p>Washington State Patrol Troopers are looking for the person who stole wires from WSDOT equipment in Seattle.</p> <p>The Monday theft forced the shutdown of the on and off ramps to the I-5 express lanes at 9th and Pike.</p> <p>WSDOT said they deal with wire theft almost every day. Police said the thieves are looking for copper and that is leaving our important infrastructure shut down until further notice.</p>

Officials said the equipment, which controlled the signs, cameras and gates, needs to be repaired before it can be opened.

Sincere Harris who has lived in Seattle for eight years, spoke to us about the crime, the vandalism and this recent wire theft issue.

"You're starting to see a real city face here, before, it wasn't like that at all," Harris said. "We're paying for it. Eventually, it's going to roll on the backs of somebody and it normally comes on the backs of us, the tax payers."

Harris is right. This affects the tax payers. WSDOT said so on their website, where they talk about material theft. They said copper wire has been stolen from other things like street lights and signals.

There they add: "Lawmakers, WSDOT and WSP are working together to stop these thefts. On May 8, 2007, Gov. Christine Gregoire signed Senate Bill 5312. It increases penalties against metal thieves. WSP aggressively investigates these crimes as they risk public safety by disabling traffic signals and other devices."

Washington State Patrol Troopers said it is something that they have seen go up over the year. They add that it is tied to a rise in the price of copper.

From last January to now, troopers said they have received 30 calls from WSDOT on wire theft issues.

Seattle Citywide Council Member Sara Nelson spoke to us about the crimes happening in the city.

"First of all, we need to document these cases," Nelson said. "We need to have the resources to respond and we also need to change the culture at city hall to really recognize this as an emergency."

Nelson said a meeting is scheduled with small business owners for Feb. 9 at 9:30 a.m. to discuss and propose solutions to the crime issues happening in the city.

In a statement to KOMO, Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell's office said:

"Mayor Harrell knows the challenges facing downtown are real and significant -- for neighborhood residents and local businesses. He is regularly meeting with neighbors, businesses, stakeholders, and public safety advocates to advance change, reset norms, and make measurable progress toward a thriving downtown.

"He believes the level of crime downtown requires swift action, even in the face of an unacceptable level of reduced SPD staffing. He is meeting with the Chief of Police and Police Department on a plan for action on crime and safety issues within the first quarter of the year, as well as working on strategies to restore SPD staffing."

"We'd like to be able to have more officers out on the street and be doing emphasis patrols and high visibility patrols and what not so that people see police officers out and about and hopefully deter them from committing crime, but unfortunately, with the staffing crisis that we're in right now, we just don't have the officers, don't have the bodies to be able to put out for a lot of that stuff," said Sgt. Randy Huserik, a spokesperson for the Seattle Police Department.

"Everybody has to step up and be accountable," Harris said in a message to local leaders. "It's not about getting rid of the police. It's not about defunding different program. It's about strengthening our community and standing together."

In the near future, Troopers said WSDOT might make the equipment wires less accessible.

	<p>Authorities are still looking for those responsible, however, officials said the cameras were not recording because the power was cut off during the theft. Police said wire thefts are hard to track down.</p> <p>KOMO reached out to district 7 Councilmember Andrew Lewis who represents the area. We also reached out to Citywide Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda. They did not respond.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 How Arbery hate crime plea deal unraveled
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/us/ahmaud-arbery-murder-plea-deal.html
GIST	<p>ATLANTA — Tara M. Lyons stood in a courtroom in Brunswick, Ga., this week with a dilemma no prosecutor wants.</p> <p>She had a deal with two of the murderers of Ahmaud Arbery, who had agreed to 30-year sentences on federal hate crime charges. But Mr. Arbery’s family was firmly against it.</p> <p>“I understand the anger, the pain and the struggle that the family is feeling with this resolution,” Ms. Lyons told the court. “I have no doubt if my son were chased down and shot like an animal because of the color of his skin, I would feel the same.”</p> <p>But Ms. Lyons said that as a representative of the federal government, she had to leave her emotions at the door. She stood by the plea deal, which required the men to acknowledge that racism played a role in their actions when they chased Mr. Arbery down and shot him.</p> <p>Judge Lisa Godbey Wood of U.S. District Court sided with the Arbery family and rejected the deal on Monday afternoon.</p> <p>Open dissent between prosecutors and victims is rare in a federal case as high-profile as the Arbery murder. And it is even rarer for a judge to side with the victims. In their fight to gain a greater voice in the United States criminal justice system over the past four decades, victims have won the right to be consulted on plea negotiations — but not to veto them.</p> <p>Joyce Vance, a former federal prosecutor whose father-in-law was murdered, said she understood when victims and prosecutors did not see eye to eye. She has never made peace with a plea deal that prosecutors made in her family’s case. “All I wanted was my father-in-law back,” she said. “You’re not thinking as a victim about what the justice system can accomplish and what works the best.”</p> <p>The role of victims in criminal prosecutions varies from state to state. Some require that they be informed in advance of any plea deal, others that they be consulted. Many states allow victims to speak or submit written statements to the court, and a few require prosecutors to inform judges of the victims’ position on any proposed deal.</p> <p>In federal cases, victims have a “reasonable right to confer” with prosecutors and the right to be informed of any deal. But prosecutors must weigh a host of other factors including the strength of their evidence, the interests of justice and ensuring that similar crimes be met with similar punishments. A plea deal can ensure that a defendant will suffer some consequences, even if a victim views them as too lenient, while a trial may result in a full acquittal. And, prosecutors do not represent victims.</p> <p>“If you’re a federal prosecutor, your client is the United States,” said Michael J. Moore, an Atlanta lawyer who served as the U.S. attorney for middle Georgia from 2010 to 2015. “Those lines, when you have a victim of a crime, can become blurry. There’s the human side of you that’s very empathetic to the victim’s situation, and then there’s maybe the more academic side and professional side, and professional obligation, that has to guide your conduct.”</p> <p>Sometimes victims are on the side of mercy. When Dylann Roof killed nine members of a predominantly Black church in Charleston, S.C., federal prosecutors successfully sought the death penalty despite the church’s opposition to capital punishment.</p>

In the Arbery case, Travis McMichael, 36, his father, Gregory McMichael, 66, and a third man were charged with murder and convicted in state court. Federal prosecutors pursued other charges, including hate crime charges and attempted kidnapping. Georgia did not have a hate crime statute at the time of Mr. Arbery's death.

Ms. Vance, the former prosecutor, said the deal that federal prosecutors struck in the Arbery case had been a good one. Hate crimes are difficult to prove at trial, she said. The deal ensured that the McMichaels would serve significant time even if their convictions in state court were overturned on appeal, and it barred them from appealing the federal case. "That was a conviction that would stand for all time," she said.

In court, the Arbery family objected to the deal at least in part because it would have allowed the McMichaels to serve time in federal prison, which is generally regarded as having better, safer conditions than state prisons. This may be especially true in Georgia, where last fall the Justice Department began an investigation of state prisons, citing a [high rate of murder and assault](#).

"I'm asking on the behalf of his family, on behalf of his memory and on behalf of fairness that you do not grant this plea in order to allow these men to transfer out of Georgia state custody into the federal prisons, where they prefer to be," said Wanda Cooper-Jones, Mr. Arbery's mother.

Yet defense lawyers like MiAngel Cody, based in Chicago and Miami, question the assumption that the federal system, which was placed [on lockdown this week](#) after a gang fight in a high-security unit in Texas, is an easier place to do time. "People think that it's Club Fed," Ms. Cody said. "Two people were violently murdered in Club Fed yesterday."

In a phone interview on Tuesday, Marcus Arbery Sr., Ahmaud Arbery's father, said he preferred for the men to face a jury of their peers for the federal charges.

"I'd like to see them go forward on the evidence," he said.

In the court hearing in Georgia on Monday, Ms. Lyons said that the Arbery family and its lawyers had been consulted numerous times by prosecutors about the possibility of a plea deal.

In early January, a few days before the McMichaels were sentenced in state court, federal prosecutors took a proposed deal to the Arbery family, but eventually shelved it after listening to the family's concerns, Ms. Lyons said.

But by Jan. 28, plea agreements had once again been hammered out between the McMichaels and prosecutors. Before those agreements were finalized, Ms. Lyons said, prosecutors consulted with lawyers for each of Mr. Arbery's parents. The family's lawyers told federal officials the parents "would not oppose a plea agreement," Ms. Lyons said.

But Ms. Lyons said that in a number of video meetings with family members and their lawyers on Sunday — the day before the hearing — it became apparent that the family was not in favor of the deal.

"I'm not up here blaming the family, your honor," she said, adding that she had "personally struggled" over the right thing to do.

Still, she said it was her job to make "sound decisions" in the interest of justice. She asked the judge to accept the plea deal. Among other things, she argued that it would guarantee prison time for the McMichaels if the state convictions were thrown out on appeal, and noted that the men would admit they were motivated by racial bias.

Judge Wood did not explicitly say she was rejecting the plea deal because of the family's objections, and experts said she might have had other reasons.

In rejecting the plea agreement, Judge Wood noted that it was a type of plea that would not have allowed her to alter the proposed sentence of 360 months in prison. “I can’t say that 360 months is the precise one fair sentence in this case,” she said.

In federal court, a vast majority of plea deals leave sentencing up to the judge. Prosecutors may agree to recommend a sentence on the lower end of the range prescribed by federal sentencing guidelines or agree to drop some charges, and defendants may receive points in their favor for accepting responsibility for their actions. But the judge metes out the sentence.

The deal presented in the Arbery case would have deprived the judge of that discretion. Judge Wood had to accept the deal as agreed, or reject it.

Carissa Byrne Hessick, the author of “Punishment Without Trial: Why Plea Bargaining Is a Bad Deal,” said judges should question plea deals more often. More than 97 percent of criminal convictions are resolved through plea deals, many of which are rubber-stamped by the courts, she said.

“The fact that this is getting so much attention for the rejection of the plea deal — that just goes to show how much judges have abdicated their sentencing power,” she said.

Mr. Moore, the former federal prosecutor from Georgia, said that a number of families disagreed with plea agreements he had reached with defendants during his time in office. “But once you have some time to discuss it and explain it, most of the time families came around and understood,” he said.

He said he never had to deal with a situation like the one Ms. Lyons faced, in which a family objected to a plea deal in open court — and a judge sided with the family.

The McMichaels are scheduled to appear before Judge Wood again on Friday morning and tell her whether they want to plead guilty in the absence of a deal or declare themselves innocent and take their chances at trial.

Jury selection will begin Monday in the trial, in which the McMichaels — if they decide to go forward — will defend themselves alongside William Bryan, 52, who, like the other men, was sentenced to life in prison by a Georgia judge for Mr. Arbery’s murder.

Some experts said this week’s hearing, which made clear that the McMichaels were willing to admit they had been motivated by racism, could make it difficult to choose an impartial jury.

In the end, victims may struggle because the remedy they want most is outside the power of the courts to give, said Ms. Vance, the former prosecutor.

“Nothing is going to bring Ahmaud back,” she said.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Federal trial George Floyd killing postponed
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/02/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases?type=styleIn-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#george-floyd-trial-postponed
GIST	<p>ST. PAUL, Minn. — The federal trial of three former Minneapolis police officers charged with violating George Floyd’s civil rights was postponed on Wednesday after one of the former officers tested positive for the coronavirus, court officials said.</p> <p>Judge Paul Magnuson, who is hearing the case, did not say which of the three defendants — J. Alexander Kueng, Tou Thao and Thomas Lane — had tested positive, but speculation centered on Mr. Lane, who was the only one of the three who was not present in court Wednesday morning.</p>

Mr. Lane's lawyer, Earl Gray, did not respond to a request for comment. Shortly before the judge announced the delay, however, Mr. Gray had approached a reporter and said, "Wait until you hear this," as he walked out of the courtroom.

Judge Magnuson said the trial, [which began last week](#), would pause at least until Monday.

The three former officers face both federal and state charges in connection with the killing of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street corner in May 2020. Their state trial is scheduled for later this year.

A fourth former officer, Derek Chauvin, was tried separately in state court on murder charges and [was convicted in April 2021](#); he pleaded guilty to the federal charges against him in the case in December.

At the United States courthouse in St. Paul, where the three former officers are now being tried, lawyers, defendants and the public are required to wear masks at most times in the courtroom, though attendees are not required to be vaccinated.

All three defendants [are charged](#) with failing to provide medical aid to Mr. Floyd during the encounter, when the officers were trying to arrest Mr. Floyd on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes. Mr. Kueng and Mr. Thao [are also charged](#) with failing to intervene to stop Mr. Chauvin from using excessive force as he knelt on Mr. Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, causing Mr. Floyd to lose consciousness and die. The killing touched off mass protests across the country over police violence and systemic racism.

Coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths have risen sharply in recent weeks in Ramsey County, which includes St. Paul. About three-quarters of the county's residents who are older than 5 have been fully vaccinated.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Guilty plea: massive Navy bribery case
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/ex-navy-captain-pleads-guilty-in-massive-bribery-case/
GIST	<p>SAN DIEGO — A former U.S. Navy captain pleaded guilty to bribery Wednesday for accepting nearly \$68,000 in dinners, hotels, parties and prostitutes from a Malaysian defense contractor, prosecutors said.</p> <p>Donald Hornbeck, who entered the plea in San Diego federal court, acknowledged that while directing operations of combat ships in the 7th Fleet in the Western Pacific, he benefited Leonard Francis by steering ships to ports for service by the contractor's Singapore-based company. Hornbeck also acknowledged that he shared confidential Navy information with Francis, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office.</p> <p>Hornbeck is one of 34 Navy officials and defense contractors, including Francis, accused of a fraud and bribery scheme that among other things provided Glenn Defense Marine Asia with classified ship schedules, allowing them to beat competitors and overcharge for services.</p> <p>Twenty-nine defendants have pleaded guilty.</p> <p>The scheme cost the Navy some \$35 million.</p> <p>"While scores of Navy officials were partying with Leonard Francis, a massive breach of national security was in full swing," U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman said in a statement. "Today another participant has admitted that he lost his way, allowing greed to replace honor and duty as the driving force in his life."</p> <p>Hornbeck, 61, of Greenfield, Indiana, is scheduled to be sentenced in September. He could face up to 15 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Pursuit armed carjacker; school lockdown
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article257985238.html
GIST	<p>A police pursuit of an armed carjacker Wednesday afternoon led Pierce County deputies to Clover Park High School in Lakewood, where the person was detained.</p> <p>The school was put on lockdown during the incident. Deputies said there are no ongoing safety concerns.</p> <p>A gun was recovered when the person was taken into custody.</p> <p>Pierce County Sheriff's Department offered few details about the carjacking or police pursuit. The department tweeted at about 2:12 p.m. that deputies had pursued the carjacker Wednesday afternoon into Lakewood, and the person got out of a car at the high school.</p> <p>The suspected carjacker fled on foot, and deputies were able to detain the person.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Bomb threats persons of interest identified?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/persons-interest-hbcu-bomb-threat-investigation-source/story?id=82626532 https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/us/hbcu-bomb-threats.html
GIST	<p>The FBI has identified five persons of interest in connection with a series of bomb threats placed to historically Black colleges and universities in recent weeks, officials said, according to a source.</p> <p>The persons of interest were connected to spoofed calls – emanating from a fake telephone number, the FBI official said, according to the source familiar with the contents of a call between FBI and DHS officials and state and local law enforcement on Tuesday.</p> <p>No bombs have been found.</p> <p>During the call, the federal officials went into more detail about the nature of the bomb threats, which started in early January, and the most recent, which occurred Monday against HBCUs and other universities, according to the source.</p> <p>In the past few days, the FBI reported over 20 bomb threats to HBCU's and other institutions -- from Howard University in Washington, D.C. to Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi.</p> <p>Several of the schools canceled classes amid concerns about the threats.</p> <p>The FBI on Wednesday said it is investigating the bomb threats to predominantly HBCUs as hate crimes, according to a statement released by the Bureau.</p> <p>“Although at this time no explosive devices have been found at any of the locations, the FBI takes all threats with the utmost seriousness and we are committed to thoroughly and aggressively investigating these threats,” the statement says.</p> <p>They FBI says investigation is being coordinated with 20 FBI field offices and is the “highest priority” for the Bureau.</p> <p>The first threat against the HBCUs came against Xavier University of Louisiana on Jan. 4, and according to the FBI official briefing state and local law enforcement, it was racially motivated.</p> <p>Following that threat in early January, two Black churches were also targeted with bomb threats – none came to fruition.</p>

There were also three bomb threats against Jewish facilities on the last day in January, but officials aren't clear if those are connected, according to a source briefed on the contents of the law enforcement call.

The F.B.I. has identified six juveniles as persons of interest in a series of bomb threats that targeted historically Black colleges and universities, a law enforcement official said on Wednesday.

The bureau said it was investigating the threats as racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism and hate crimes.

The bureau made the announcement during a week in which at least 17 historically Black colleges and universities received bomb threats, prompting administrators to temporarily cancel in-person classes and lock down buildings.

The F.B.I. said its joint terrorism task forces were leading the investigation, which was "of the highest priority" and involved more than 20 field offices across the country.

"Although at this time no explosive devices have been found at any of the locations, the F.B.I. takes all threats with the utmost seriousness and we are committed to thoroughly and aggressively investigating these threats," the F.B.I. said in a statement.

Students said they felt fearful, angry and mentally taxed by the threats.

"A lot of us feel like this is political," said Joyce Dihi, 19, a freshman at Spelman College in Atlanta, which received a threat on Tuesday, the first day of Black History Month.

"There are people out there who don't like that H.B.C.U.s support the excellence of Black people," Ms. Dihi said. "But to threaten us," she added, "is too much."

The development that six juveniles had been identified as persons of interest was reported by NBC News earlier on Wednesday.

The authorities have so far not described any of the threats as credible. But school officials at many of the universities took precautions, such as sweeping campus buildings and moving to remote instruction.

On Monday, at least seven H.B.C.U.s, including Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, La., and Delaware State University in Dover, Del., received bomb threats.

At least 10 other historically Black colleges, including Spelman and Howard University in Washington, reported threats on Tuesday.

Howard also received bomb threats on Monday and on Jan. 5, when at least eight H.B.C.U.s received threats, its president, Wayne A.I. Frederick, said.

While Dr. Frederick declined to share details about the threats, he said they "definitely included language that suggested it was motivated by hate."

One threat this week was made to the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, and the second went directly to the university's command center, he said. Both were made over the phone.

The threats were particularly insidious considering that it is Black History Month, he said.

"The people who have come before us have experienced this, and given their lives in some circumstances, to give us the opportunity to experience this again, in a different form," he said. "We need to respect and honor what they have had to traverse. We must stand tall in this moment as well."

Although Morehouse College, the men's college that neighbors Spelman, did not receive a threat, students said they were worried because of their proximity to Spelman and because of their friends there.

"Spelman is our sister school," said Kyle Sloan, 19, a freshman at Morehouse. "This month is supposed to be about glorifying Black excellence, but this disrupts the whole flow. This feels like someone threatening to take that away from us."

When threats were made on Jan. 5, many campuses were nearly empty because of winter break and the coronavirus pandemic, but dormitories and administrative buildings were still cleared out.

Robert Mueck, the director of public safety at St. John's College, in Annapolis, Md., said he had noticed an uptick in bomb threats aimed at schools last November.

"My assumption is that social media is just making this much easier to communicate anonymously," Mr. Mueck said. "Folks can call these in, make these threats and share who they're going to target online."

Cleveland University, Yale University, Ohio University and Miami University received bomb threats during the first week of November, Mr. Mueck said.

On Nov. 7, Cornell, Brown and Columbia Universities also received bomb threats.

On Nov. 11, New York University, Hebrew Union College, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Southern California received bomb threats.

Not much is known about the prevalence of bomb threats aimed at schools. In 2018, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives reported that 529 bomb threats were made to schools, a 33 percent increase from two years earlier.

Bomb threats in general are on the decline.

The F.B.I. reported 818 bomb threats in 2020, a decrease of 25 percent from 2019, and the lowest number in five years.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Laser strike on Guardian One helicopter
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/crime-law/laser-pointed-sheriffs-office-chopper-near-sea-airport/B6PQYQKUTZCHTCBNA7GFUKVQWI/
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. — A deputy who was flying the King County Sheriff's Office Guardian One chopper was flashed with a laser Friday night.</p> <p>Deputy Alex Paul, who was also flying the helicopter, was responding to complaints that commercial aircraft were being repeatedly flashed with lasers near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.</p> <p>That was when his helicopter was lit up with a laser as well.</p> <p>Pointing a laser at aircraft is not just a crime, but a danger.</p> <p>"If it does hit your cockpit or your windscreen just right, it can refract the light, kind of sparkle out and cause some disorientation, make it difficult to see," said Paul.</p> <p>Paul said he and his tactical flight officer were OK.</p> <p>They were unable to track down where the laser came from.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 Shooting near King Co. courthouse Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/man-shot-downtown-seattle-3rd-ave/281-d5c39657-2950-4ca9-900b-e43da5d268f7
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Police are investigating a shooting that took place near the King County Courthouse in downtown Seattle Wednesday morning.</p> <p>The shooting happened around 6 a.m. on the 700 block of 3rd Avenue, which is about a block north of the courthouse.</p> <p>The Seattle Police Department said a man was shot and was taken to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle.</p> <p>A spokesperson for the Seattle Fire Department said the man is approximately 34 years old and was in stable condition when they were taken to the hospital.</p> <p>KING 5 crews saw about a dozen officers looking for evidence near Cherry Street and 3rd Avenue around 6:40 a.m. The investigation briefly disrupted King County Metro bus service Wednesday morning, but service has since resumed.</p> <p>No suspect information has been released at this time.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 New meth-heroin drug: 'tablet K'
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/dyp4gk/meth-heroin-pill-afghanistan
GIST	<p>A drug that is a mix of meth and opioids, and believed to be the first of its kind in the world, is on the rise in Afghanistan.</p> <p>UN drug experts have warned that pills being sold on the streets as “tablet K” mark a new era in narcotics production because some of them contain both stimulants and depressant drugs. The tablet also represents a further step in the expansion of a cheap synthetic drug market serving up to the world’s poorest populations.</p> <p>Tablet Ks look like badly-made, colourful ecstasy pills and sell for between £3 and £12 each. Alongside the usual mish-mash of gimmicky pinger logos, such as Donald Trump’s head, Rolex and Tesla, batches of tablet Ks have been stamped with the name of the Netflix series La Casa De Papel (Money Heist) with a masked face from the show on the back.</p> <p>The pills have been steadily growing in popularity, particularly among young Afghans, since 2016. Despite this, until now, there has been little attempt to find out what the pills contain.</p> <p>But on Tuesday, the UN’s drugs office published a forensic analysis of 536 pills seized over 2020 and 2021 and sold on the streets as tablet K. It found that while the drugs were sold under one brand name, the contents fell into three types.</p> <p>Of the pills tested, 42 percent contained mainly meth, 23 percent mainly MDMA, and 32 percent contained the “surprise” mixture of methamphetamine and opioids. The opioids found in these pills was most often heroin, but was sometimes tramadol, a synthetic opioid painkiller.</p> <p>Although the MDMA infused pills are typically sold for more than those containing meth or heroin, the report said there was no obvious link between the visual aspects of the tablets and the presence of a particular drug. So in essence people buying tablet K are essentially involved in a lucky, or unlucky dip, and could find themselves getting high from meth, MDMA or a combination of meth and heroin. One in ten of the pills also contained sildenafil, which is sold under the brand name Viagra.</p>

“The presence of an illicit drug product in tablet form that contains both methamphetamine and opioids has implications for the understanding of drug use and supply in Afghanistan and beyond,” said the report. “The identification of opioids in a large number of samples [containing methamphetamine] was unexpected.”

Mixing stimulant and depressant drugs in the same hit is something heroin users have been doing for decades with speedballs, by buying cocaine or crack and heroin, and either injecting or snorting them both at the same time. Even though the drugs work in opposite ‘directions’ to each other, studies have shown that taking a speedball can potentiate the normal effects of both drugs to create a more extreme high. Stimulants and depressants are also mixed in Red Bull and vodkas or espresso martinis.

But drug trade observers who spoke to VICE World News said they had not come across a ready-made product containing the two types of high before.

“I have never heard of such combinations in tablets in European drug markets or elsewhere,” said Andrew Cunningham, head of drug markets and crime at the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). He said that so far these types of pills “seemed to be a local phenomenon in Afghan drug markets” and that they were likely cheap products targeted at the Afghan population.

Between March 2020 and March 2021 officials seized 80kg of the tablets (around 160,000 individual pills), double the amount seized the previous year. In 2020 a survey carried out among young people found that for the first time use of tablet K was higher than methamphetamine, also a rising drug in Afghanistan which has become a meth production [hub](#).

According to the report, tablet Ks are found across urban and rural parts of Afghanistan, with a high prevalence in the Eastern (bordering Pakistan) and Northeastern (bordering Tajikistan) regions, where use of the drug is two to three times higher than average. Production facilities for tablet K have been detected in Kabul and Kunduz, but there have also been reports of the pills being trafficked from Peshawar in Pakistan and Tajikistan.

Analysis of tablet Ks found the pills contained a total of 26 different substances. Alongside meth, heroin and MDMA analysts found a plethora of cheap pharmaceuticals such as caffeine, carisoprodol (a muscle relaxant), chlorpheniramine and diphenhydramine (antihistamines), dextromethorphan (a cough suppressant), propranolol (a beta blocker), diazepam, sildenafil, paracetamol, tramadol, chloroquine (an antimalarial medication), and tinidazole (an antiprotozoal medication).

“Afghanistan may no longer seem such an unlikely place for synthetic drug manufacture and constitutes just the latest example of a largely plant-based drug economy embracing synthetic drug manufacture,” said the report.

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